

# ASIAN INSPIRATIONS

By the time *Turandot* was composed in 1924, the West's fascination with Asia, which could be traced back many centuries, had waxed and waned in several phases. In the 18th century, the taste for chinoiserie had brought supposed East Asian characters and characteristics to everything from highboys to garden pagodas, and above all to porcelain. More than a century later, Gilbert and Sullivan could still parody the fashion for "gentlemen of Japan" appearing "on vase and jar, on screen and fan, on many, many, many, many, many, many, many, many, a jar."

Another fashion was for *turquerie*, bringing Ottoman—or rather "Ottoman"—motifs to décor and dress (as when ladies wrapped their heads in silk turbans). "Turkish" characters turn up in operas by Mozart and Rossini, and we hear snatches of what was thought to be Turkish music in the works of composers from Lully to Beethoven and beyond. The fact that an Ottoman instrument introduced to Europe for marching bands, a long pole with a variety of little bells and jingles, could be called both a "Turkish crescent" and a "chapeau chinois" suggests that precision as to culture was not required.

The 19th century saw manifestations such as *orientalisme*, a genre of painting that occupied itself not with East Asia but with Syria, Turkey, and North Africa, and the interest in Buddhism (in a rather abstract form) that rippled from the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer to artists and intellectuals like Richard Wagner. Then there was *japonisme* in painting, fashion, graphic design, and interior decoration, and the impact of Japanese woodblock prints on artists from Whistler to Van Gogh. Many Symbolist artists, such as Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon, depicted idyllic or frightening dream worlds through which Chinese, Indian, or Cambodian motifs and mythological figures hovered or skulked.

What drove these Western composers and artists to borrow, steal, adapt, or parody a huge range of forms and ideas from Asia? Generalizations are unlikely to be accurate or helpful; specifics are the key. Britain or Italy? India or China? 1720 or 1920? What patron, what audience, what purpose, what social/economic/sexual/class context?

Did some Western artists implicitly support imperialism, exploitation, and the *mission civilisatrice*? Did some pick up whatever shiny exotic device would appeal to audiences and sell books, tickets, paintings? Did some mix into their visions of Asian Neverlands undertones of ethnic conflict, sexual violence, or degradation (or confining idealization) of women? Were some sincere in their interest and esteem, finding new inspiration and even new hope? Yes to all. And then, looking through the window from the other side, there is the matter of Asian musicians' and artists' long engagement with the cultures of the West....

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An unidentified Javanese dancer from the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris.



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