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Guest-edited by Lauren M. E. Goodlad and Julia M. Wright

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Article

"The Japanese Village" and the Metropolitan Construction of Modernity

Joseph McLaughlin
Ohio University

Abstract

This article details the history of "The Japanese Village" exhibition in late-Victorian Knightsbridge. This exhibition, which opened two months before the premier of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* in March 1885, provides an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the variety of ways Japan was represented to and by Victorian audiences. In addition to describing the event, the essay studies newspaper accounts of the exhibition's destruction by fire and subsequent rebuilding, a narrative that promotes a distinction between the picturesque ephemerality of a traditional village and the metropolitan settings in which it was staged and contained.

- 1 From the middle of the nineteenth century, Japan had a special hold on Victorian imaginations for a number of reasons, many of which arose from its sudden, seemingly spontaneous, entry into world affairs. Early writers on Japan, such as A. B. Mitford in *Tales of Old Japan* (1871), believed that they had discovered a society stuck in the Middle Ages, one which was still imbued with the values of chivalry and honor which Victorian intellectuals, most notably Thomas Carlyle, felt had been lost in an age of industrial capitalism. Japan was shaped by, and in turn re-shaped, an important Medievalist strain in Victorian artistic and intellectual life. For many, Japan's openness to the West and the apparent willingness of many Japanese to adopt Western ways signaled by the Meiji Revolution in 1868 provided a pleasing alternative to the concurrent efforts of other peoples, most notably China and India, to resist English and Western imperialism. In fact, the delegation sent to negotiate the first treaty with Japan in 1857 stopped in Calcutta and had to leave behind its military escort to assist in quelling the Indian Mutiny. Thus, Britain's formalized entry into relations with Japan happened in the shadows of violent insurrection in its most significant colonial possession. This context is indispensable for understanding the almost immediate attraction to Japan by the British.
- 2 Japan also provided writers with almost laboratory conditions for examining processes of modernization; between 1868 and 1900, British writers marveled at a Japan they believed had been transformed, almost miraculously, from a "feudal" society into a modern, industrial-military nation that was able to defeat Russia in the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-1905. Others wrote about Japan as

a type of aesthetic paradise, one where craft, artistry, and ritual remained untainted by the pressures of commodification. Writing in *The Book of Tea* (1906), Kakuzo Okakura, a Japanese writer who had been taught by British and American thinkers, referred to the tea ceremony or "Teaism" as "a religion of aestheticism," a "cult founded on the adoration of the beautiful among the sordid facts of everyday existence" (1). While writers such as Okakura saw Japan as a validating instance of Aestheticist doctrines, it would seem equally plausible to consider that Aestheticism provided a window through which Japan was viewed and a set of beliefs by which it became known. Japan offered, to Oscar Wilde among others, an alternative aesthetic to Realism, one that was less concerned with a slavish accuracy, and more concerned with an idealized notion of Beauty.¹¹ Because Japan was less central to British economic concerns than India, China, Arabia, and Egypt, it was perhaps more readily treated in aesthetic and aestheticist terms.

- ³ As part of my current project on Victorian representations of Japan, I have been studying a popular "Japanese Village" exhibition that was held, with one lengthy and significant interruption, in Knightsbridge between January 1885 and June 1887. This research began as an effort to provide context for more extensive work on Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*, which opened at the Savoy in March 1885. Those who have seen Mike Leigh's film *Topsy-Turvy* (1999), a historical film focusing on events surrounding the first production of *The Mikado*, might remember a scene in the middle of the film in which the Gilbert character visits this exhibition.
- ⁴ As I have tracked information on this exhibition through Gilbert scholarship, through widely available Victorian periodicals such as the *Graphic*, the *Illustrated London News*, and *Punch*, and other more obscure, local papers, such as the *West London Standard* and *Chelsea Herald*, the Japanese Village exhibition in Knightsbridge has become a central object of my study by itself. The mythologization of the exhibition in Gilbert scholarship reflects a tendency, one might even say a desire, to see theater and other arts as simply reflective of other cultural processes, such as imperialism, and more authoritative scientific discourses, like ethnography and anthropology. Yet, since the pioneering work of Said in *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, and subsequent developments in postcolonial studies and cultural studies, it has become clear that artistic productions like *The Mikado* have a much more complicated relationship to the world of museums, exhibitions, and the colonial sciences which were thought to authorize them. The "Japanese Village" also provides yet another venue for one to study the exhibition of native peoples and crafts in late-Victorian London. At the same time, since we can only recover that experience through the press reports that now memorialize it, we can use these journalistic artifacts to reflect upon how audiences in late-Victorian London experienced exhibitions. As I am discovering in the larger project of which this present study forms a part, that experience of consuming other cultures was highly self-conscious and anything but naively racist. Finally, this essay will explore how this presentation of a quaint Japanese village, in the midst of the bustling metropolis, functioned to stage a contrast between past and present that helped Londoners to see themselves as *modern*, for better or for worse. In this particular case, the presentation of a contract became ever more clear and explicit after Humphery's Hall, the venue for the exhibition, burnt down in May 1885 and was quickly re-built to provide a safer, more durable home for a Japanese village that symbolized fragility and ephemerality.

I. Myth

- ⁵ As discussed above, Mike Leigh's *Topsy-Turvy* repeats a prevalent myth in

Gilbert scholarship, one that I have traced back at least as far as 1928, but I suspect probably owes something to Gilbert's own acts of self-mythologization. In the film, Gilbert's collaborative relationship with Arthur Sullivan has reached a point of crisis. Gilbert cannot come up with any story line that pleases Sullivan and seems to have reached a point of creative sterility. One afternoon, Gilbert's wife invites him to attend the newly opened Japanese Village exhibition in Knightsbridge. Gilbert is fascinated by everything he sees there: the native craftsman, the green tea (which, with nervous derision, he calls "spinach water"), and, most importantly, a theatrical production that involves a gruesome sword fight.

6 Two scenes later, we see Gilbert giving his servant directions for hanging a Japanese sword on the wall. Shortly thereafter, the sword falls and almost knocks Gilbert on the head as he paces his study late one night trying to come up with ideas for his next opera. He picks up the sword, starts to shadow fight, and then goes into a goofy sort of trance. We see light in his eyes, the beginnings of a smile, and then the scene shifts to an elaborately staged version of Ko-Ko's first appearance as the Lord High Executioner in *The Mikado*. For students of Victorian culture, this is a seemingly plausible narrative of inspiration. The implication is clear: this "Japanese Village" exhibition and the souvenir sword Gilbert took home from it become the genesis for one of Gilbert and Sullivan's most famous and successful light operas. In incorporating this legend in the film, Leigh extends decades of scholarship that cite Gilbert's trip to the "Japanese Village" exhibition as the crucial inspiration that rescued him from a period of creative sterility and saved his partnership with Arthur Sullivan.

7 Leigh's film has a long pedigree. *The Story of Gilbert and Sullivan*, published by Isaac Goldberg in 1928, offers an almost identical version of *The Mikado*'s genesis:

It is quite in the nature of things, then, that *The Mikado*, according to Gilbert himself, should have been suggested by the slipping, in his studio, of an old Japanese sword to the floor. He picked it up, pondered over it, and thought of the Japanese village, recently established at Knightsbridge as a living miniature of the homeland. Perhaps English society, at last, had caught up with Oscar Wilde and his Nipponese aesthetes. Certainly, it was flocking to the diminutive village of diminutive geishas, drinking tea and reveling in the excitement of this mild exoticism. Once the notion of a Japanese atmosphere had occurred to Gilbert, his mind reverted to certain Ballad islands of his own. [2]

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The craze for things Japanese, building since the so-called "opening of Japan" in the 1850s, had reached its height by the mid-1880s. Gilbert had already commented on this fascination a few years earlier in his spoof of Oscar Wilde in *Patience* (1882). When the sham aesthete Bunthorne has a moment alone, he sings the following confession: "I do not long for all one sees / That's Japanese. / I am not fond of uttering platitudes / In stained glass attitudes. / In short, my mediaevalism's affectation, / Born of a morbid love of admiration!" (Bradley 291-93).¹³ The material culture of orientalism—commodities like tea and swords, authentically organized scientific exhibitions, as well as imported structures and natives—supplies the raw material for art and popular culture, such as a Gilbert and Sullivan light opera. Here, the world of art draws its inspiration from a new material reality. Unfortunately, this version of artistic inspiration, one that tantalizingly anchors a popular text in an actual exhibition, is in this case just plain wrong. While we know that Gilbert attended this exhibition—a scrapbook of his containing photographs of the exhibition's native performers can be studied in the British Library manuscript room—the exhibition did not open until January 1885, a mere two months before *The Mikado* opened at the The Savoy. Indeed, we know from textual sources that he began working

on the libretto for *The Mikado* in May 1884 (Bradley 554). Arguments about the exhibition's status as inspiration are greatly exaggerated, though one can understand their lingering power, because of their complicity with simplistic causal arguments that envision orientalist theater and culture as merely derivative of more scholarly and scientific practices. In debunking this myth, I join others^[4] in offering an understanding of Victorian society that does not see culture—literature, theater, and all of the arts—as a reflection of dominant ideas about exotic people, places, and things, but, rather, views culture alongside science as mutually constitutive discourses which shape Victorian ideas about other peoples through situated acts of representation.

⁸ In recent years, many scholars have complicated conversations about realism and its role in both the theater and exhibition hall, placing both venues in relationship to a range of sites and institutions in which imperial discourses were constructed, reproduced, legitimated, disseminated, and challenged. The distinction between "scientific racism" and "commodity racism," made by Anne McClintock in *Imperial Leather*, continues to be a useful starting point. In her account, scientific racism is "embodied in anthropological, scientific and medical journals, travel writing and ethnographies" (33). Scientific racism is elite, male, and learned. For McClintock, toward the end of the nineteenth century, the prominence of this scientific racism becomes less influential than a more popular phenomenon that she calls "commodity racism." This form occurs "in the specifically Victorian forms of advertising and photography, the imperial Expositions and the museum movement"; it serves to convert "the narrative of imperial progress into mass-produced consumer spectacle" and moves imperialist discourse out of the scientific societies, resituating it in the commercial and domestic spheres. McClintock convincingly demonstrates "commodity racism" through an extensive and brilliant analysis of soap advertisements. The weakness in her formulation is its chronology, one that views the "the narrative of imperial progress" as shifting from one epoch and sphere and domain, mid-Victorian science, into another, the late-Victorian arts and commodity culture.

⁹ More recently, the historian of geography Felix Driver and the theater historian Edward Ziter have challenged narratives of scientific diffusion into commodity culture. Driver's work on the Royal Geographic Society reveals that the "science" of geography, from its very beginnings, is constituted by an "unsettled frontier," one that calls into question any "neat distinction between the discourses of adventurous travel and scientific exploration" (2). His account of developing colonial discourses shows the inextricability of the will-to-knowledge and the will-to-pleasure as Victorians strove to understand and consume their empire. In *The Orient on the Victorian Stage*, Ziter persuasively demonstrates that "the theatre and related venues allow us to examine both the dissemination of specific images of the East and how an evolving poetics of Eastern spaces was generated within evolving strategies of spatial representation" (6). His argument compels us to see displays of objects and people in museums and exhibitions, in the theatre, and in a wide array of popular entertainments as mutually informing and constitutive, not simply reflective of imperialist knowledge production in the learned societies. The work of Driver and Ziter provide a rationale for debunking the myth of *The Mikado's* origins in the Japanese Village—this is not simply a matter of academic fact-checking. Rather, it helps those of us who study literature, art, and popular culture, to see how they are not simply derivative of, or secondary to, more important discourses. Perhaps more importantly, this scholarship highlights the hybrid quality of various modes of staging the Orient, encouraging one to work against the grain of much scholarship on *The Mikado* which claims that, as a fantastic farce, it has absolutely nothing to do with Japan^[5] and, at the same time, brings into focus the theatrical qualities of Victorian science and exhibition, like the performance of the Japanese Village.

II. Exhibition

- ¹⁰ The Japanese Village Exhibition opened at Humphery's Hall, Knightsbridge, on January 10, 1885. One of the intriguing aspects of its location is its proximity to the museumland constructed in South Kensington after the Great Exhibition of 1851 (with profits from the Great Exhibition). Advertisements for the Japanese Village in the *Illustrated London News* were prominent for three months. They emphasize that the Village was "erected and peopled by natives of Japan." The advertisements also report "skilled Japanese artisans and workers (male and female) will illustrate the manners, customs, and art-industries of their country, attired in their national and picturesque costumes. Magnificently decorated and illuminated Buddhist temple. Five O'Clock tea in the Japanese tea-house. Japanese Musical and other Entertainments. Every-day Life as in Japan."^[6] In addition to emphasizing the authenticity of the village's construction by "natives of Japan," these advertisements set the tone for other images of the exhibition in the *Illustrated London News* and the *Graphic*.^[7] Three categories of activity seem to be emphasized in the newspaper coverage of the Japanese Village. First, most of the exhibition seemed to have involved Japanese natives involved in handicraft production and the decorative arts, something not terribly surprising in Morris's England and also consistent with one of the central themes of my larger project, that is Japan as an aesthetic and Aestheticist paradise. A feature in the *Illustrated London News* on February 28 shows craftsmen involved in tray and cabinet making, screen painting, stick carving, covering umbrellas, and making cloisonné enamel. The ad also features a focus on "musical and other entertainments," such as those depicted in *Topsy-Turvy*. Finally, the story singles out for notice a religious artifact, the "magnificently decorated and illuminated Buddhist temple."
- ¹¹ The Japanese Village exhibition was opened with conventional claims of "Royal and distinguished patronage." Accounts also note the presence of Sir Rutherford Alcock, who was British consul-general in Japan for many years during the turbulent and revolutionary 1860s. Alcock was also an authority on the *Art and Art Industries of Japan*, the title of a book he published in 1878. The organizer of the Japanese Village was a Mr. Tannaker Buhicrosan. One great frustration in researching this event is that I have been unable to uncover much about Buhicrosan or his wife, who several newspaper sources claim was Japanese herself. Along with the materials for the structures built under cover of the exhibition hall, Buhicrosan imported over 100 persons, including 26 women and children, to build and inhabit the village and perform for its visitors. Newspaper coverage tells us that Buhicrosan was an entrepreneur, who had spent time in Japan and had been toying with the idea of an exhibition for 20 years in order to show his fellow British citizens that the Japanese were not a race of semi-barbarians ("Great Fire at Knightsbridge"). One of the more fascinating claims made in the press is that the exhibition's promoter was "activated by the reverse of selfish motives, for it was announced by Sir Rutherford Alcock, that the profits of the venture are to be used by Mrs. Buhicrosan to form a mission to Japan to assist in the development of the tenets of Christianity, and to improve, by their teaching, the position that married women have in that country" ("The Japanese Show"). While I have been unable to discover if this claim has any validity or if the project was ever carried out, the possibility that the profits made from importing and displaying Japanese natives in all of their idealized quaintness and picturesque exoticism would be used to remake Japan according to Christian and late-Victorian feminist principles is, to say the least, a provocative possibility.
- ¹² Religious politics swirled around the exhibition's mission and reality. In March, a story in *The West London Standard and Chelsea Herald* repudiated the rumor,

scandalizing many Londoners, that Buddhist rites were actually being performed in the temple. For instance, the *Illustrated London News* had seen fit to play with the possible anxieties and desires associated with reverse colonization by depicting an obviously English young woman ensconced within and enframed by a Buddhist "place of worship." While some accounts point to the Buddhist temple as a sign of the exhibition's authenticity—the natives need some place to practice their strange religion—this story assured readers that most of the natives imported by Buhicrosan were already Christian and the temple was just for show:

It is true, says Mr. Buhicrosan, that a Buddhist Temple has been erected in the village, for the simple and sufficient reason that no representation of the village in Japan would be complete without one. But it is totally untrue that any of the rites and ceremonies are observed within it by the inhabitants.... Moreover, Mr. Buhicrosan is a Christian, and so are most of the 'Japs' in the Knightsbridge village, and they go to church twice every Sunday, which is more than can be said for 'all those who profess to call themselves Christians' in England.

"Knightsbridge" 14 March 1885

- ¹³ In addition to significant coverage in the *Graphic* and *Illustrated London News*, the popularity of the Japanese Village also caught the attention of *Punch*, which devoted far more space to two images inspired by the Exhibition in January and February than they did to a rather more famous image of Gilbert and Sullivan in March (figure 1). In late January, readers of *Punch* were invited to contemplate an image of reverse colonialism in "An English Village From a Japanese Point of View." (figure 2). In it, the artist provokes us to consider how England might appear to foreigners if its essence were sought in the same sorts of activities that exhibitions characteristically focused on. This England is one of blacksmiths, pubs, squires, agricultural laborers, and dog fights. It presents to a sophisticated metropolitan audience both the inadequacy of letting the "village" stand for all of England in the eyes of foreigners and, at the same time, how foreign England really looks when viewed as a quaint and traditional village. In late February, the Japanese Village was used again, this time as material for an on-and-off *Punch* series on "Metropolitan Improvements." Here, the Village is seen as inspiration for copy-cats, in this case, "Choctaw braves" who have "set up their wigwams in Regent Street." (figure 3). In this image, *Punch* imports the prototypical savage of Carlyle's imagination and casts him as a canny street huckster in London. These *Punch* images demonstrate not only the contemporaneous significance of the exhibition as worthy of commentary and as popular point of reference, they also point out a highly ironic and sophisticated sensibility about empire and its effects on life in the metropolis. *Punch* raises the specter of the returned gaze of the exotic other, as well as the actual presence of "savages" competing with indigeñous street performers on one of London's most fashionable shopping streets. In doing so, *Punch* surfaces tensions about which its Victorian readers were quite self-conscious, namely the existence of those who were anxious about the ubiquity of metropolitan others and those, like *Punch*, who saw such fears as quite silly. Furthermore, *Punch* testifies to both a fascination with Japan and a fascination with that fascination, that is, to the beginnings of a critical engagement with Britain's own orientalist practices.

Figure 1



Punch (London: March 28, 1885) 145.

full size image

Figure 2



Punch (London: January 24, 1885) 47.

full size image

Figure 3



Punch (London: February 28, 1885) 97.

full size image

III. Fire

- ¹⁴ On Saturday, May 2, a fire at the Japanese Village consumed all of the structures built for the exhibition, destroyed Humphery's Hall, and killed one of the Japanese who had been asleep in the hall. On May 9, the *West London Standard and Chelsea Herald* reported that

Nobody could visit the Japanese Exhibition with its flimsy cottages, and light and slender stalls without thinking what a bonfire it would make.... Successful though the Japanese Village has been ever since it was first opened in January last, and as it undoubtedly will be when, if we are rightly informed, it is re-opened in a few weeks' time, it has never attracted such an amount of public attention, nor is it likely to do so again, as it did on Saturday last."

"Knightsbridge" 6

Immediately, Buhicrosan vowed to rebuild the Exhibition hall and to send to Japan for more materials to re-create its Japanese content. However, the optimism of a few-weeks' time was unrealistic; the Village would not open again until December. One reason for this, though surely not the greatest, was intense scrutiny from the Board of Works to ensure that it was no longer a fire-trap. Buhicrosan's insistence that he would rebuild and the realization of that ambition is clear evidence that the exhibition was highly profitable, though one cannot know whether to measure the profitability in terms of monetary gains or the accomplishment of his purported disinterested goals.

- ¹⁵ For someone interested in trying to recover and analyze the history of an exhibition like the Knightsbridge Japanese Village, the fire that destroyed it turns out to be an occasion for otherwise elusive knowledge. The fascination with the fire we witness in the press account above, along with coverage of the

subsequent inquest into the death of one of the village's Japanese inhabitants, becomes an occasion for readers in 1885 and today to glimpse something more of the lives behind the scenes at the Japanese Village. Disasters like fires allow public inquiry into and scrutiny of the lives and characters of their victims because investigations into things normally considered private are legitimated by the search for a cause.

¹⁶ In this case, coverage of the inquest reveals that the Japanese, brought from Yokohama by Mr. Buhicrosan, had been housed in dormitories nearby in the Brompton-road while they had built the exhibition but, after it opened, they slept in the exhibition hall itself: "On the night before the fire he could not say how many were in the building, but he should think about 60. The females slept in an iron building in the entrance to the annex from the Village" ("Inquest" 3). Note here the propriety displayed about large numbers of people sleeping in a single place and the insistence on the separation of the sexes, a concern that reminds one of nineteenth-century concerns about the sexual lives of slum-dwellers. The proprietor of the Hall, Mr. Humphery, also informed the inquest "he never saw any cooking going on in this village" ("Fatal Fire"). Apparently, a Japanese witness was also sworn in and an interpreter provided, namely "the young man who performed marvelous feats with a screen balancing on his feet," but the witness was unable to supply any fresh evidence. While the inquest provides clues about issues concerning sleeping arrangements, there also seemed to be quite a bit of interest in what would now happen to the homeless natives, suggesting possible fears about the Japanese presence in London becoming more widely dispersed. This is not to dismiss legitimate anxiety for the welfare of the exhibition's Japanese performers. Instead, it is to couple this concern with fears about one hundred Japanese natives cast free of the containing space of the exhibition.

¹⁷ A few weeks later, the *West London Standard* reports that the rubble "is being rapidly cleared away and arrangements are being made to rebuild the hall of fire-proof materials from designs approved and sanctioned by the Metropolitan Board of Works" ("Knightsbridge" 23 May 1885). The paper also suggests that the destruction of the Japanese Village might serve as an opportunity for Gilbert and Sullivan: "While the carts of the contractors are at work, it might have been well had carte blanche been given to Carte of the Savoy, to add to the realism of the 'Mikado,' by introducing the unemployed Japs in some of his scenes." While this is surely intended as nothing more than a witty remark, one cannot dismiss the author's inference concerning a possible movement from one sort of theatrical space to another and the ease with which one newspaper reporter could imagine a transition from the exhibition to the theater, showing that the line between what one might imagine as scientific space and cultural space was fairly indistinct and permeable. A month later, we learn that the Japanese natives are fulfilling an engagement at the Hygienic Exhibition at Berlin, until the new village can be completed ("Knightsbridge" 20 June 1885).

¹⁸ While I have yet to investigate the role played by Buhicrosan's Japanese natives in an exhibition devoted to hygiene, I suspect it is not irrelevant to the final aspect of the Japanese Village's history I want to examine: its rebuilding and re-opening. In March 1886, the *Graphic* reports that, once again,

The Japanese Village is one of the prettiest sights in London. In no way disheartened by the conflagration which laid his little hamlet in ruins, Mr. Tannaker Buhicrosan has rebuilt the village on an enlarged and improved scale—a comfortable and spacious theatre, being one of the most noteworthy features...there is now no danger to life to be apprehended from fire. The requisite alterations have been completed by additional exits to various parts of the buildings, and the Metropolitan Board of Works have granted their certificate. To an artist, the village, with its old temple, bridge, and ornamental water, is most *quaintly picturesque*.

"Afternoon Tea"; my italics

These last two words need to be underscored; perhaps no two words in the project I've undertaken attach themselves more frequently to Japan than "quaint" and "picturesque." Late-Victorian discourses on Japan borrow much from earlier nineteenth-century Romanticism and Medievalism; Wordsworth, Ruskin, and Carlyle have as much to do with the image of Japan as any diplomat, soldier, or adventurer who actually went there.

- 19 The destruction and resurrection of the Japanese Village offer a wonderful example of the striking contrast between the fragility of traditional society (the "village") and the security and solidity of an emerging technological modernity (the metropolitan exhibition venue). The *Illustrated London News* reported that "The space covered by the new village is twice as large as that which was occupied by its predecessor, and the whole of the buildings are of a more solid and more permanent character than before" ("The Japanese Village"). The article highlights the contrast between the picturesque quality of bamboo-work and the solidity of European structures. In the "village," "the houses are accurate models of the various types of Japanese architecture, and are very picturesque buildings, their light bamboo work and quaint Eastern style of decoration affording a pleasant contrast to the heavier and more solid character of European dwelling-houses." An even more striking contrast exists when one considers the village and the newly certified exhibition hall that contains it: "The structure in which the village has been erected is of brick and ironwork with a concrete floor, and large iron girders supported by ornamental iron pillars; and there are four entrances and exits." While the contrast between the ephemeral and vanishing qualities of an oriental society and the heavy, more permanent presence of the present is nothing new for scholars of the period, I argue that this contrast was not simply a matter of "West v. East," "here v. there," "now v. then," or "us v. them." Rather, it was constructed and displayed as part of the metropolitan built environment. The invention of Old Japan and Modern London were part of a single process and can be seen in a single site, one of which contained, sheltered, and protected the other. Modernity is not here and now as opposed to the there and then of tradition. Rather, the old is contained within the new; it is its necessary heart and core. At the same time, it is not difficult to imagine the two taking divergent paths: as London became more technologically sophisticated and fire-proof, the more quaint and picturesque became the flimsy, fragile, Japanese structures which it contained.^{18]}
- 20 In closing, what I have tried to highlight in this essay is the frame and the experiences of audiences that attended the Japanese Village. What was on display at Buhicrosan's Exhibition was not simply a representation of a traditional village, but the staging of a contrast between it and the ultra-modern exhibition hall in which it was housed. In displaying Japan, London was putting itself on display. This was something Isaac Goldberg, the writer whose myth about the connection between the Japanese Village and *The Mikado* was debunked at the beginning of this essay, actually had right in 1928: *The Mikado*, Goldberg writes, "is London tripping in Liberty silks.... Gilbert was never more English than when he concealed himself in the flowing robes of his imported potentate." London, if I may paraphrase, was never more English than it was in the contrast staged at the Japanese Village.

Biographical Notice

Joseph McLaughlin

Joseph McLaughlin is the author of *Writing the Urban Jungle: Reading Empire in London from Doyle to Eliot* (Virginia, 2000). His current research focuses on representations of Japan in late-Victorian Britain. He is an associate professor of English at Ohio University, where he also serves as department chair.

Notes

- [1] Wilde's most extensive discussion of Japan takes place in his essay, "The Decay of Lying." Wilde's persona Vivian sees Orientalism as the antidote to Western practices of mimetic realism: "The whole history of these [decorative] arts in Europe is the record of the struggle between Orientalism, with its frank rejection of imitation, its love of artistic convention, its dislike to the actual representation of any object in Nature, and our own imitative spirit" (25-26). Although Wilde's conception of a non-mimetic Orientalism is sweeping, he spends the most time in the essay discussing Japan: "In fact, the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there is no such people" (48).
- [2] Goldberg's book, not surprisingly for a book from the 1920s, is weak on sources. For instance, when he tells us that this quotation presents a history "according to Gilbert himself," he does not supply any information about where Gilbert told this story or made this claim (309). Thus, it becomes difficult to trace the legend back to its source. Given the impossibility of Gilbert having attended the exhibition before he began work on *The Mikado*, one is right to question whether other parts of the myth—the falling sword—are accurate.
- [3] In this song, Gilbert makes the link between the craze for things Japanese and the earlier and ongoing Victorian fascination with the Middle Ages. This linkage between Japan and Medieval Europe is a primary area of exploration in my larger project.
- [4] See below for discussions on McClintock, Ziter, and Driver. My own research on the culture of imperialism and the representation of empire has been most profoundly shaped by the works of Said, Mackenzie, and Young.
- [5] On the back cover of the edition of *The Mikado* I use in the classroom (Dover Thrift, 1992), the blurb describes this "most widely admired of all the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas" as "set in a fanciful (and wholly imaginary) Japanese society." The text's unattributed editorial preface informs the reader that Gilbert "transform[ed] a light farce (with only the thinnest of Japanese elements) into a perennially amusing satire of Victorian England, and of human society and behavior in general" (iii).
- [6] Text of an advertisement that appeared in the *Illustrated London News* on January 3, 1885.
- [7] Stories and images appeared in the *Graphic* on May 9, 1885 and March 13, 1886. The most extensive coverage in the *Illustrated London News* appeared on February 21, 1885.
- [8] In a similar fashion, as I have argued elsewhere, the invention of "Darkest London" by General Booth and other social explorers must be read as a crucial constituent of London's modernity. See *Writing, the Urban Jungle*, particularly Chapter 4, "Colonizing the Urban Jungle: General Booth's *In Darkest England and the Way Out*."

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