

Finer things

Since decorative Edo period artwork was shown in Europe more than 150 years ago, Japan has influenced jewellers in the west.

By Kate Youde



Above, from left: NVW A Call To The Wild hair comb, £15,500, nvwjewel.com; Tiffany & Co necklace and pendant (1876), on show at the 'Tiffany Wonder' exhibition in Tokyo; Alexis Falize cloisonné enamelled gold locket (c1869), on show at Treasure House Fair, London, POA, wartski.com

Below: Kayo Saito Wave Brooch II in 18k gold (2022), £12,200, on show at Treasure House Fair, adriansassoon.com; Sylvain Deleu



The natural silhouettes appeal to collectors



Katherine Purcell is holding a brightly coloured pendant locket in her outstretched palm, pointing to the influence of Japan on its maker. The gold piece by Alexis Falize, dated c1869, is adorned with cloisonné enamelling inside and out, a technique the Parisian jeweller adopted from Japanese decorative arts.

Falize drew on the "decorative vocabulary" of Japanese printmakers including Hokusai, whose work had recently reached Europe, in this case for the depiction of pheasants, cranes, cockerels and a duck, says Purcell. Falize owned a copy of Hokusai Manga, a collection of sketches, she adds. "When you see...how just a few lines capture a bird, a figure or a bat, it was so different to the western perception of the world."

Wartski is showing the jewel at the Treasure House Fair, opening at the Royal Hospital Chelsea, in London, on June 27. The event includes other antique jewels in the Japanese taste, the type of objects that inspired them and work by modern Japanese jewellers, reflecting what fair director Thomas Woodham-Smith says is a "growing interest in both Japanese antiquities and contemporary art".

This focus comes as Tiffany & Co explores its relationship with Japan as part of the exhibition *Tiffany Wonder*, being staged at Tokyo Node gallery until June 23. That show follows *Van Cleef & Arpels and Japan: an artistic encounter*, recently closed in Paris. The French house displayed 33 pieces, created between 1923 and 2023, at its Place Vendôme boutique to demonstrate the enduring influence of the country on its designs.

The catalyst for jewellers' initial inspiration was the signing of the Treaty of Kanagawa

between the US and Japan in 1854, which in effect ended a period of national seclusion in the latter country that had lasted for more than 200 years and reopened it up to trade with the west. The subsequent flow of artefacts to Europe included woodblock prints by Edo artists that would inspire 19th-century painters including Vincent van Gogh.

The London International Exhibition in 1862 included Japanese works of art assembled by Rutherford Alcock, the British consul-general in Japan. However, it was the 1867 Exposition Universelle in Paris, where Japan showcased its own selection of works, that really ignited the craze for Japanese art and design. "It is very hard to get a handle on just how all-enveloping this influence was," says Purcell. "As soon as people discovered it, everybody wanted it." The French art critic Philippe Burty coined the term "Japonisme" in 1872 for the interest in all things Japanese.

The exposure to new techniques, materials, motifs, objects and perspectives made a quick and lasting impression. Admiration for Japanese art and design is evident from the 1870s in Tiffany silverware and jewellery designs. A gold, platinum, glass, silk and paper necklace and pendant from 1876, shown in the American jeweller's current exhibition, features 14 links depicting Japanese-inspired avian and floral designs.

Other jewellers to draw from Japan included René Lalique. Carl Fabergé created carved animals inspired by netsuke – decorative toggles often carved from wood or ivory – which attached a lacquer inro (an ornamental container) to the obi (sash) of a man's kimono. A woman's kimono sash was decorated with an obidome (a piece of jewellery worn on a cord tied around an obi and positioned in the centre at the front). London Japanese art gallery Grace Tsumugi is showing netsuke, inro and obidome at Treasure House Fair. Cartier and Van Cleef & Arpels took inspiration from inro for bejewelled vanity cases in the 1920s, including the 1923 black enamel, diamond, yellow gold and platinum example shown in the latter's recent exhibition.

Kristian Spofforth, head of the jewellery department at Sotheby's in London, says that as the Egyptomania experienced in the 19th century enjoyed a revival following the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922, the fascination with Japan enjoyed a "resurgence" in the art deco period.

"I read [that] the human mind craves order and simplicity, and that is why often when we look at simple black and whites, and the very clean lines of a lot of the art deco period, we find peace," he says. "That comes from the Japanese Edo period, where they really had refined their designs." Like Purcell, Spofforth says that in the Edo period something beautiful from nature was depicted in "a few very straight, simple lines". He adds that the "very defined, simple beauty" of art deco jewellery is still admired a century on.

Jewellers have continued to look to Japan for inspiration. Van Cleef & Arpels collaborates with the Japanese artist Junichi Hakose on its limited-edition lacquered butterfly clips. British designer Natasha Wightman, whose brand NVW's debut collection, Ravens, launched at Dover Street Market in New York, in May to coincide with Frieze art fair and moves to Los Angeles on August 3, was influenced by netsuke for the jet and boxwood birds in her 16 one-of-a-kind pieces. She wanted the intricate designs to reflect the fluidity of movement of two wild ravens, which she affectionately dubbed Cronk and Craw, that used to visit her garden.

Stone and wood carver Graham Heeley crafted the ravens front and back, depicting every feather and claw, often using handmade tools. "It was very important for me that, [as] with the netsuke figurines, they are 3D,"



Modern Japanese jewellery tends to have a timeless aesthetic

Left: Van Cleef & Arpels lacquered butterfly Hanashobu clips in 18k yellow gold, white mother-of-pearl, lacquer and diamonds. POA, vancleefarpels.com

Below: Kazumi Nagano bracelet in silk, nylon and gold thread, £4,250, on show at Treasure House Fair, didierfrd.com

says Wightman. "It's as much a pleasure for the wearer as the beholder."

According to Tsumugi Shoji, founder of Grace Tsumugi, there was no tradition of jewellery such as necklaces, bracelets and earrings in Japan during the Edo period, something the country subsequently adopted from the west. Didier Haspelslagh, director of London gallery Didier Ltd, which specialises in jewellery from the second half of the 20th century, says it was only in the 1980s that Japanese contemporary jewellers really emerged with their own styles. He is showing at least six Japanese works at Treasure House Fair and says this jewellery tends to share a delicate, minimalist aesthetic that does not date.

These pieces attract international buyers. Wahei Aoyama, founder of the Tokyo gallery A Lighthouse called Kanata, says the market for contemporary jewellery in Japan is "non-existent", with consumers there preferring to buy fine and high jewellery from established brands

rather than conceptual pieces. Japan is Tiffany's second-largest market after the US.

It is the "natural silhouettes" that appeal to collectors of jewellery by Kazumi Nagano, a former Nihonga artist whose work he is showing at Treasure House, says Aoyama. She weaves either precious metal or linen paper threads with nylon to explore the beauty of nature, something Aoyama says is associated with a Japanese aesthetic. Japan's Shinto religion is the worship of nature.

Kayo Saito says her delicate gold and silver pieces give the "essence" of a flower, for example, as the Edo Rinpa (or Rimpa) artists she admires portrayed a "stylised, simplified nature" in screen paintings. The Kent-based Japanese jeweller has noticed more interest in Japanese jewellery in Europe in recent years. She thinks this is partly because, like her, designers unable to find an education in contemporary jewellery in Japan have come to study in Europe and stayed to develop their work. ●

