

Review:

Napier, Susan J.: *From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (2007). ISBN-13: 978-1-4039-6214-0, ISBN-10: 1-4039-6214-6, pp. 258, £45 hc.

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Abstract

Japan has been a source of fascination and fear in the mind of its Others for well over a thousand years, particularly if Asia's early encounters with the Japanese are included in the historical mix. Such historical encounters between Japan and its Others have formed the source of academic attempts to account for the attraction of Japan to the West for some time now, perhaps most famously in Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1989). Susan J. Napier's new monograph tries once more to tease out some the reasons both for the high regard in which Japanese traditional culture is held by the "West," and for the rather more cautious approach taken to the contemporary "Japans" that Western countries have encountered since Japan's forced re-opening to international trade in the 1800s. Intriguingly, she does so by drawing a dotted, if not continuous, line from early French Impressionist collecting and adapting of Japanese *ukiyo-e* (floating world) woodblock art prints to contemporary fans for anime and manga.

In doing so Napier supplies some convincing and important new insights into why and how Western scholars and peoples have responded to, and represented, Japan to the rest of the world. Particularly good sections of the early chapters include the manner and ways in which traditional Japanese arts have been incorporated into Western art movements, literature and architecture in the past, and indeed, the present times. Work on Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture is a particular highlight, as is the biographical reinterpretation offered of Lafcadio Hearn's translation of Japanese folklore and fairytales.

However, it is in her contemporary, and deeply researched, work on contemporary fans for anime and manga that Napier's writing really comes to life. Conducted over the course of six or so years, Napier provides much detail about the American anime and manga fan. From portraits of "typical" yet unusual fans, collated through myriad interviews, to her reading of the Miyazaki Mailing List's penchant for mythologizing the work of animator Hayao Miyazaki, Napier's contemporary sections display not just an acute critical acumen in dealing with the often highly emotional world of contemporary fandom, but also a keen and dispassionate literary eye for observing the nature of the individuals involved in the practices of such fandom. The work on cosplay, or costume play where fans dress up as their favourite characters, is particularly useful and insightful as it places fans into the context of "Cons", the conventions which act as some of the more extreme and under-scrutinised spaces in which they perform their fandom.

This excellent end to *From Impressionism to Anime*, has a perhaps unintentional effect on a reading of the book as a whole. In the early version of Napier's previous anime monograph, titled *Anime From Akira to Princess Mononoke*, there was a final chapter that began to reveal the importance of American fandom to our understanding of what anime means to parts of American culture. The latter half of her new monograph reads like an expansion of that early work, offering new and detailed insights into particular groups of fans, as well as attempting overviews of how other "ordinary" or typical fans of anime behave in relation to the texts that they profess to admire. While no bad thing, it does highlight the fact that the early portions of the book are not as exciting and original as the second half. It also emphasises the particularity and atypicality of some of Napier's research choices. The Miyazaki Mailing List for instance is, as Napier rightly cites, not a typical group. Fans who attend conventions or university clubs are not necessarily "typical" either. This raises a set of interesting follow-up questions for Napier's new work: how can we access and understand who it is that makes up the largely invisible minority (or possibly even the majority) of anime's audiences? Furthermore, how crucial a role does America play in global anime fandom? How different to American fandom is the fandom from the largely ignored tertiary anime fan markets? What might Japanese anime fan practices tell us about why it is that American fans behave as they do?

If these questions suggest an even more ambitious set of fan-related projects than even Napier's attempt to cover the whole of the "West" and its engagements with Japanese culture, then it merely suggests quite how much of anime culture remains obscure at present. Indeed, one of the central problems with Napier's *From Impressionism to Anime* book is precisely that of scope. While the book deeply probes some of the areas of connection between Japan and the rest of the world, particularly Impressionist France, I have seen recent talks from experts from other European countries (Spain, Germany, the UK) which throw the centrality of the

Franco-Japanese art exchange from this period into question. It seems then that Napier's account is more epochal than holistic, and its account of Japanese-Western engagements is one more concerned with French, American and some British points of contact, rather than with mapping a full history of Japanese-Western relationships. Troublingly, the narrative that emerges is one that may well cause some consternation to students of history, as Napier shifts historical registers between "great man" histories of artists and literati to focus in the latter half of the book on fans. This is not to suggest that either one is more deserving of her time, but rather that the most interesting narratives, and Napier's most insightful points, come when she is breaking entirely new ground. She is, for example, much more convincing and passionate when discussing the anime fandom of "Marc" than she is when rehearsing the work of Julia Meech on Frank Lloyd Wright.

In a book that is providing a new representation of Japan through its interest in Western peoples' (here read French and American for the most part) interactions with Japan, we might well ask how Napier's people were selected and, across the whole project, why and for whom? There are already good volumes such as Meech's and others mapping the interactions of earlier luminaries in more depth than Napier has space to devote here, and it is not always clear why her account is better, or all that different, to theirs. She is careful to update information wherever possible, though, and *From Impressionism to Anime* does draw some potentially useful parallels between contemporary and older engagements. However, this in itself could use more investigation in future: just how similar were early art collecting habits in Europe to the behaviours demonstrated by contemporary fans? Would it be possible to investigate the middle classes who Napier tells us collected Japanese epiphenomena like fans in the early period? More detail in the contemporary section would have been helpful to students of anime too; for instance, analysis of more specific habits like cosplaying, especially collecting and fan-produced fiction like scanlations (manga translations done online) or fansubbing (fan subtitling of anime) might have proven beneficial, providing more of a sense of an overall picture of the spectrum of manga and anime fan behaviours. As with any important work, Napier's readings suggest perhaps more questions than she has space to provide answers. While Napier's focus is clear and her writing always accessible (though editors have misplaced at least one of her chosen quotes) and her anecdotes (frequently included here) engaging, this is a work that is bursting with important areas for investigation beyond the confines of art history and even of more conventional fan studies. What becomes clear from reading *From Impressionism to Anime* is that, should Napier choose to continue in this rich vein, there is much more that anime and manga cultures have to offer us in terms of reception and fan research.