

Review

Julie Robinson (ed), *The World of Mortimer Menpes: Painter, Etcher, Raconteur*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2014, pp. 248, \$49.95.

Reviewed by Tets Kimura

The book was published by the Art Gallery of South Australia in line with the exhibition (13 June–7 September 2014) on Adelaide-born artist Mortimer Menpes (1855-1938). After Japan abolished its isolationist *sakoku* “closed-country” policy in the middle of the nineteenth century, the exportation of Japanese art became “an international phenomenon” (p. 70). However, in comparison to that of famous European artists such as Claude Monet and Vincent van Gogh, Menpes’ name is not widely known, not just in Australia (due probably to the fact that he never returned to Australia once he arrived in London at the age of 20) but also in Japan by the scholars of *Japonisme*.

Menpes held his solo exhibition “Paintings, Drawings and Etchings of Japan” in London in 1888 (p. 13), after travelling to “exotic locations” including Japan (p. 9). His style became “Japan-inspired” after meeting the elderly artist Kyosai Kawanabe, and maintained this influence even though he extensively travelled to various other countries (p. 13). He was highly inspired by the spirit and techniques of Japanese art; according to him, “an English artist familiar with all the most

modern methods of his craft in Europe could not but learn much by a sojourn in Japan, could not but bring back with him a wider knowledge and a riper experience” (p. 192). He “became attuned to the growing popularity in London of Japanese art and objects” and the King even wanted to visit his studio (p. 13). In 1899, he opened a Japanese-inspired studio house in London – the building combined his interest in Japan as a symbol and “expressions of British *Japonisme*” (p. 18).

Harris argues that his paintings “owe a debt to *Japonisme*” (p. 68). Menpes was, in particular, fond of the “sumptuous colours of Japan” (p. 60) and developed his own way to convey the Japanese colours. Furthermore, according to Messenger, Menpes “sought a deeper cultural understanding of Japanese art in relation to how it functioned as lived experience and to move beyond the purely aesthetic response of Western artists” (p. 62).

In fact, Japanese aesthetics became an obsession throughout the West especially among artists. Those who had never visited Japan became collectors of Japanese items and adopted the Japanese styles. Famous examples include Monet and van Gogh. For instance, “influenced by the equally sensuous Japanese screens representing flowers on a gold ground that reflects light,”¹ Monet’s works became more abstract. In *Waterlilies and Japanese Bridge* (1899), he “retained a subtle linear perspective which channels the eye into depth, thus

¹ National Gallery of Australia, n.d., <http://nga.gov.au/monetjapan/Detail.cfm?WorkID=W1509>, accessed 27 June 2015.

conserving a characteristic of naturalistic painting where the picture plane is conceived as a window through which one looks at a view.”² Furthermore, Van Gogh’s paintings such as *The Bridge in the Rain* (1887) and *The Flowering Plum Tree* (1887) are heavily influenced by Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock print, and oriental-looking characters are used as a decoration around the paints. However, the characters were used in terms of design and looks – without knowing of their original cultural contexts. Similarly, in Menpes’ works such as *Flower of the tea* (1887-1888) (p. 63), *Sun and Lanterns* (1887-1888) (p. 66), *Alone in a Shoe Shop* (1887-1888) (p. 69) and *Japanese Street Scene* (1887-1888) (p. 71), Japanese writings that appear in urban sceneries are imitated, not written– it is clear that Menpes was unable to read or write the Japanese. His adaptation of Japanese aesthetics was not all philosophical, but still partially stylistic.

However, this does not mean that Menpes’ contribution should be disregarded. In the end of the nineteenth century, it was difficult to develop a mutual understanding between the East and West. Rudyard Kipling famously expressed his view on Asia in *The Ballad of East and West* (1889).³

*Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;*

² *Ibid.*

³ Kipling, the 1907 Nobel Prize winner of literature, published this poem in 1889.

*But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor
Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from
the ends of the earth!*

The poetry implies that there was a clear line between the East and West in the minds of Westerners. Whether the East and West have nothing in common or by the meeting of “two strong men,” respect or understanding can occur between them, in history, an equal consideration to the “other” culture was thought to be beyond comprehension. Menpes, however, physically approached Japan when travelling to Japan was difficult and took account of Japanese indigenous aesthetics in Japan – Monet and van Gogh never even visited Japan. The book (and the exhibition) have given us an opportunity to learn of the existence of the hidden South Australian, who should be more valuable than the distinguished European artists to the exportation of Japanese aesthetics.