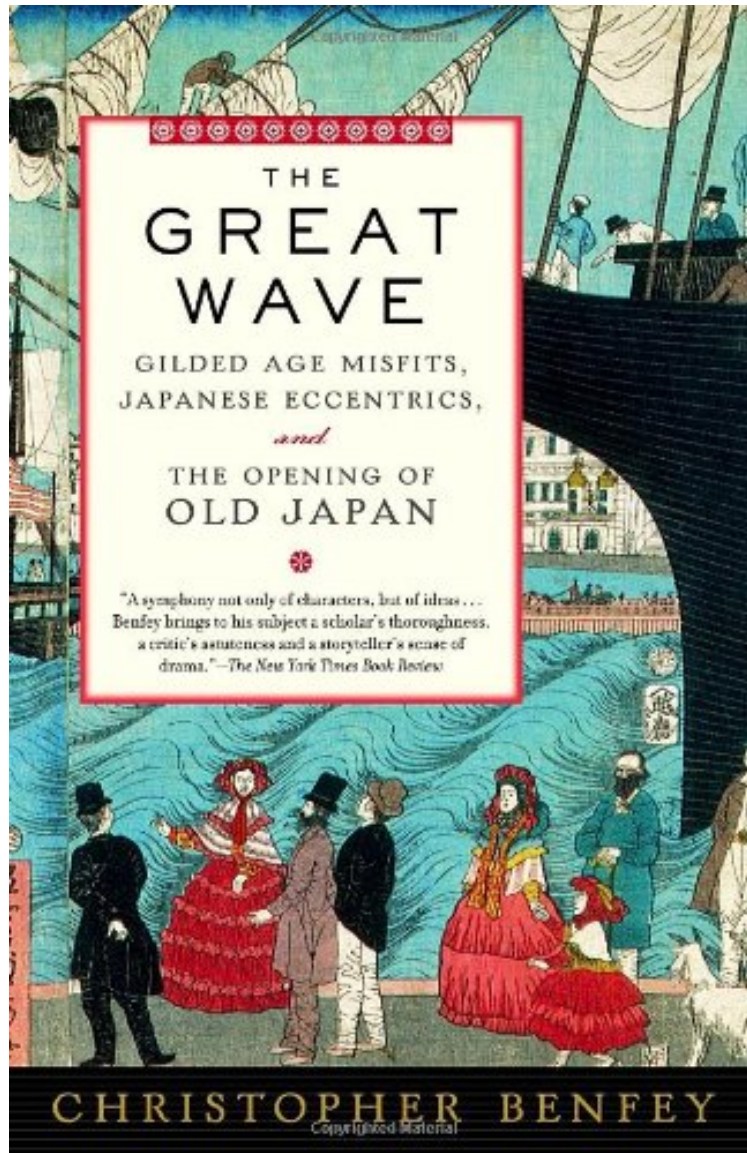


The Great Wave: Gilded Age Misfits, Japanese Eccentrics, and the Opening of Old Japan

Christopher Benfey

**Download PDF | ePub | DOC | audiobook | ebooks*



DOWNLOAD



READ ONLINE

#667736 in Books Christopher E G Benfey 2004-08-10 2004-08-10Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.00 x .70 x 5.30l, .58 #File Name: 0375754555332 pagesThe Great Wave Gilded Age Misfits Japanese Eccentrics and the Opening of Old Japan | File size: 45.Mb

Christopher Benfey : The Great Wave: Gilded Age Misfits, Japanese Eccentrics, and the Opening of Old Japan before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Great Wave: Gilded Age Misfits, Japanese Eccentrics, and the Opening of Old Japan:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. *A History of Boston's Interactions with Japan* By Greg Polansky
In the 21st century, Boston is not exactly a global city that people think about other than for colleges and maybe healthcare. But in the 19th century, Boston was one of the foremost cities in the United States due to the importance of maritime trade and Boston's role in whaling and trade. So this history is really about Boston's interactions with Japan more than it is about the United States and Japan. And what a history it is. After Commodore Perry "opened" up Japan, there was a huge interest in Japan among the wealthy of the United States. This history is thus about the way that Americans viewed Japan, their experiences in Japan, and how their views of Japan affected life at home in Boston. The author argues that after the experiences of the Civil War, some Bostonians were disillusioned with life at home and wanted to explore the world to regain a sense of order and familiarity. And they turned to Japan which represented a more natural order than the rapidly industrializing world around them. Sadly, Japan itself was rapidly industrializing after Commodore Perry's trip and so this history is about the final days of a vanishing Japan and the responses of the Americans to it. This is a well written book though at times it does drag on. Still, for those who are curious about an important cultural exchange, this is the book that will help you understand why Boston has the best collection of Japanese art outside Japan.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. *A Unique American Perspective of Japan from the 19th Century* By Ted Marks
A curious epoch in 19th century American history involved the opening of Japan and the infatuation that many Americans had with that mysterious Asian nation. Christopher Benfey details that era in rich detail that will leave many of his readers nostalgic for a time before Japan began to exert itself through its commerce and militaristic tendencies. A time when Japan symbolized the purity of an exotic culture - as opposed to an economic superpower. For American Japanophiles, this is a marvelous book. On the other hand, for Japanese readers there will be, no doubt, questions about the impurity of the Japanese ethic as interpreted by the American "eccentrics" (Benfey's term) that visited Japan in the latter half of the 19th century and in the early years of the 20th century. Full disclosure: this reviewer is a native Bostonian who spent seven years living in Japan as a foreign correspondent. As such, the reviewer has an affinity for Things Japanese (not to mention the Brahmin way of life) that is probably far above the sensibilities of the average reader. With that marker laid down, let's proceed to the gist of this book that should be of value to anyone with a serious interest in Japan. The cast is star studded. The main characters are icons of Brahmin history: Herman Melville, Henry Adams, John La Farge, Edward Sylvester Morse, art collector Isabella Stewart Gardner, the astronomer Percival Lowell and Henry Cabot Lodge. Non-Brahmin characters include former presidents Ulysses S. Grant and Theodore Roosevelt, architect Frank Lloyd Wright, and Spanish/American art impresario Ernest Fenollosa. Cameo appearances include the poet Emily Dickenson (and her dysfunctional family). Helping all these eager beaver Americans interpret the Japanese culture was Kakuzo Okakura, the son of a Japanese merchant educated by American teachers at a missionary school in Yokohama. Okakura was more fluent in English than he was in Japanese, but he wandered around the United States in a formal Japanese kimono that had a decidedly dramatic effort on his clients in Boston (Okakura was to become the curator of Japanese art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston). One of the most colorful characters in this book is Lafcadio Hearn, an American/Greek journalist who spent the final decades of his career in Japan, writing articles and books about the Japanese culture that enthralled his audience in the United States. Author Benfey chronicles the travels and encounters of Americans in Japan with a tsunami of colorful details about their personal lives and endeavors. Some of it is quite salacious as Benfey frequently describes the sexual peccadilloes of his subjects. As the Brahmins roamed Japan, many of them bought up as much Japanese art as they could and sent it home where much of it ended up in the unparalleled collection of Japanese art in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. They were no doubt driven by their aesthetic concerns as they scooped up this art, but they come across as a bit craven in their buying sprees, and no doubt many Japanese rue the day when the Brahmin collectors bought up unique Japanese art on an almost indiscriminate basis. Indeed, one has to wonder what Japanese readers think of this book. Some of the Brahmins were most probably an early rendition of the so-called Ugly Americans who were to appear later in Southeast Asia (thus the "Misfits and Japanese Eccentrics" in the title of this book). With the exception of Lafcadio Hearn who spent the final 14 years of his life in Japan (including several stints in remote sections of Japan) the visiting Americans visited only the most obvious places, such as Yokohama, Tokyo, Kyoto and Nikko. Few of them ventured into the heartland of Japan and if they did, it was only for a few days or weeks. And while they came home with wondrous tales of the mysterious Nippon, it was unlikely that they could arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the Japanese people, their innermost thoughts and their fundamental outlook on their introspective lives. For one thing, Japanese society is distinctly inward looking (almost racist by the contemporary American standards), and the average Japanese looks down on anything foreign, especially the so-called gaijins (foreign people) who have invaded Japan for more than a century. Kakuzo Okakura, in fact, would no doubt be considered a traitor to the Japanese cause as he helped the Americans sweep up the Japanese cultural artifacts that they sent home. Certainly, his interpretation of the Japanese culture would be viewed as less than an honorable endeavor from the Japanese perspective. For, in fact, Okakura was more westernized than he was Japanese. Indeed he spent most of his later life in America. Those comments aside, this is an excellent book that gives insights on both the Japanese and American cultures late in the 19th century.

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. *Swept away* By M. A. Newman
This is an excellent book on what Japan meant for the people who visited in the early

days of the Meiji period. The author concentrates on a series of vignettes to explore the significance of Japanese culture in the lives of some of the leading US citizens of the period. It was not all just collections of fans and diets of raw fish. Some of these early travelers used a trip to Japan to acquire ancient artifacts (many of which are in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts), Henry Adams went on quest for nirvana, the artist John La Farge went with him and absorbed new artistic techniques that marked his subsequent work. The cast of characters also includes Isabelle Stewart Gardner and Theodore Roosevelt. This is a very interesting book, sure to delight the reader who really wants to know what happens when west meets east.

When the United States entered the Gilded Age after the Civil War, argues cultural historian Christopher Benfey, the nation lost its philosophical moorings and looked eastward to Old Japan, with its seemingly untouched indigenous culture, for balance and perspective. Japan, meanwhile, was trying to reinvent itself as a more cosmopolitan, modern state, ultimately transforming itself, in the course of twenty-five years, from a feudal backwater to an international power. This great wave of historical and cultural reciprocity between the two young nations, which intensified during the late 1800s, brought with it some larger-than-life personalities, as the lure of unknown foreign cultures prompted pilgrimages back and forth across the Pacific. In *The Great Wave*, Benfey tells the story of the tightly knit group of nineteenth-century travelers—connoisseurs, collectors, and scientists—who dedicated themselves to exploring and preserving Old Japan. As Benfey writes, A sense of urgency impelled them, for they were convinced Darwinians that they were that their quarry was on the verge of extinction. These travelers include Herman Melville, whose Pequod is shadowed by hostile and mysterious Japan; the historian Henry Adams and the artist John La Farge, who go to Japan on an art-collecting trip and find exotic adventures; Lafcadio Hearn, who marries a samurai's daughter and becomes Japan's preeminent spokesman in the West; Mabel Loomis Todd, the first woman to climb Mt. Fuji; Edward Sylvester Morse, who becomes the world's leading expert on both Japanese marine life and Japanese architecture; the astronomer Percival Lowell, who spends ten years in the East and writes seminal works on Japanese culture before turning his restless attention to life on Mars; and President (and judo enthusiast) Theodore Roosevelt. As well, we learn of famous Easterners who came West, including Kakuzo Okakura, whose *The Book of Tea* became a cult favorite, and Shuzo Kuki, a leading philosopher of his time, who studied with Heidegger and tutored Sartre. Finally, as Benfey writes, his meditation on cultural identity seeks to capture a shared mood in both the Gilded Age and the Meiji Era, amid superficial promise and prosperity, of an overmastering sense of precariousness and impending peril. From the Hardcover edition.

From *Publishers Weekly* The quests for spiritual fulfillment of the figures profiled here unfold in extraordinary ways. Disaffected by the mercenary state of American culture in the Gilded Age following the Civil War, many of New England's intellectual elite sought a new social order from the largely unfamiliar Japan, a nation whose own intellectuals were in turn looking to shake off years of isolation and forge a new identity as part of the international community. Cultural historian Benfey, a professor of English at Mount Holyoke (Degas in New Orleans), seamlessly braids the far-flung adventures of cultural importers/exporters from both countries and offers an enjoyable collection of eclectic and surprising historical narratives about such figures as Isabella Stewart Gardner and Henry Adams. Benfey traces the importation of Japanese culture to the U.S. back to intrepid pilgrims like Herman Melville, who wrote of exploring Asia's "impenetrable Japans." This curiosity boomed in the cultural confusion after the Civil War, when many Americans felt that European philosophy could advance no further except through mysticism, which the exotic Japan was thought to offer. Benfey relates the lives of several Japanese eccentrics who likewise believed that a foreign culture might provide useful tools for a country similarly in the midst of dramatic change. The cultural exchanges that Benfey describes, at times comic, are tantalizing examples of how nations develop and in what ways they are able to learn from each other. Though Benfey sometimes meanders and indulges in digressions into the decadent lives of 19th-century Boston Brahmins, his account is consistently enjoyable and always informative. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. From *Booklist* For aesthetes dissatisfied with the upholstered world of late Victorian taste, Japan offered a cultural richness that mesmerized an unusual gallery of American characters. Their collecting and publicizing of all things Japanese animates this braided tour of cultural encounter. Of the people Benfey follows, none but Henry Adams is a household name today, and he was a latecomer to the Japanese fad, a languid, solace-seeking (after his wife's suicide) tourist among Benfey's group. More distinctive are those who initially sailed to Japan after the Meiji restoration of 1868. Benfey recounts Edward Sylvester Morse's seminal importance; he went to Japan as an anatomist of mollusks and returned as a popular writer and lecturer on Japanese style, particularly architecture. Others brought back immense quantities of artwork, or, like muralist John La Farge, sought a creative change in Japan's land- and seascapes. Conveying both rapture and disappointment with Japanese culture, Benfey draws a sophisticated portrait of the period's personalities. Gilbert Taylor Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved Advance praise for *The Great Wave* The close-up brilliance of Christopher Benfey's depiction of the early stages of the encounter between sophisticated representatives of the American Gilded Age and those of nineteenth-century Japan required an assured grasp of both cultures, their assumptions and envies, their gifts and

weaknesses, their humor and lack of it. He has portrayed this mutual loss of virginity with grace, wit, and a range of reference that re-echoes the original astonishments and is a pleasure to read. W. S. Merwin Praise for Christopher Benfey Degas in New Orleans Yes, Degas in New Orleans involves a haunted house, ghosts, and titillating couplings, but all elements are solidly anchored in historical events and retold by Christopher Benfey in a deft synthesis of art criticism and historical speculation.... An elegant introduction to a city that remains a secretive, seductive metropolis. Grace Lichtenstein, The Washington Post Book World The Double Life of Stephen Crane In this astute and subtle new reading of Stephen Crane, Christopher Benfey discovers the mysterious process of a life taking shape from its art. Mr. Benfey writes beautifully and is as sharp on the social and psychological dimensions of Cranes experience as he is on language and literary craft. Jean Strouse, author of Alice James From the Hardcover edition.