

Krakow meets Japan and its culture at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The role of the press in the reception of Japanese art

Summary

This article discusses the role of the press and its influence on the reception of Japan and its art at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in Krakow, and draws attention to the fact that Polish society, especially in Galicia and Krakow (but also in the other partition sectors) had access to information about Europe and the world beyond what was commonly brought to them in the papers of the time. Credit for discovering Japanese art and culture is doubtless due to journalists publishing in Krakow and Galicia, who passed on that knowledge in quotes from dispatches from Western Europe but also in their own articles and columns. In Krakow's press Japan was presented to Poles at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries as a friendly and open-minded but far-away country with rich culture and art that were deeply rooted in its tradition. The range of Japanese issues discussed by the press, whether periodical or daily, was remarkable, regardless of their editors' outlook. That wide spectre covered current political developments; history of Japan; political and administrative reforms, including the opening of the country to the rest of the world after 1868; education and schooling; freedom of speech; religion; as well as art and culture. In keeping with Feliks Jasiński's views, the papers argued that getting to know Japan and its culture may help guide a Pole to Polish artists, and – through them – help him find his way to native art. They also pointed out that political awareness may stimulate an urge and desire to study the art and culture of one's own country. No unfavourable note or opinion about Japan and its culture can be found in the press of the time. The reader could feel that local papers were very fond of that country, taking a pro-Japanese stance for fairly obvious, patriotic and anti-Russian, reasons, and, being Polish himself, he could fully share that approach. The political context played a vital part in the perception of Japan and its art, which was very appreciative in Krakow, but dismissive in Warsaw. The picture of Japan in the press published in Warsaw, a city that lied within the borders of the Russian empire, was nothing like that presented by journalists in Krakow and Galicia, which were part of Austria-Hungary, the difference having been driven by dissimilar local political scenes and systems of alliances. Interest in Japan and Japanese art in Krakow, Warsaw or Lviv was indisputably triggered by Feliks Jasiński and his Japanese exhibitions. Jasiński could feel support from the local press in the Austrian sector, a proof of which were expressions of gratitude he received in response to the criticism and disapproval by Warsaw journalists and society. Frequent visitors to exhibitions at the Salon of the Society of Fine Arts' Friends, Krakow-based journalists were conversant with works by contemporary Polish artists and could easily see to what extent Japanese art exerted its impact on their style, whether they lived in Poland or stayed in Paris.