

Émile E. Guimet *Promenades Japonaises: Tokio-Nikko* (1880) and Félix Régamey *Japon (Nihon sobyō kikō)* (1903)



Motoko Sato



Emile Etienne Guimet. (Source: F. Régamey (1880), *Le lendemain je reçus la viste du grand prêtre*. Internet archive. <https://archive.org/details/promenadesjapona00guim/page/270/mode/2up>)

Émile Étienne Guimet was born in 1836 in Lyon, France. He became an entrepreneur after taking over a dye factory belonging to his father who was a chemist. He also turned his hand to the arts, composing ballet and opera. He first visited northern Europe, became interested in archaeology and ancient studies, and traveled around

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the world, including a trip to Egypt in 1865. In the summer of 1876 (Meiji 9), he visited Japan with the painter Félix Régamey so as to observe religious conditions in the country. In 1879, he established a museum in Lyon based on his collections, which he moved to Paris in 1888. The Musée Guimet was transferred to the national government in 1928, and is well known for its collections of Japanese, Chinese, Indian, and Near Eastern art. He died in 1918 at the age of 82. His books include, amongst others, *L'Isis romain* and *Les Isiaques de la Gaule*.

His friend, Félix Régamey was born in Paris, France in 1844. Influenced by their father, a sketch artist, Régamey and his brothers took up art as a profession. From 1871 to 1873, he stayed in London, where he contributed to *The Illustrated London News*, and then moved to the United States where he continued his work as an illustrator. In 1876, he and Guimet came to Japan from San Francisco and visited China and India over the following year. He exhibited his sketches from the trip at the Paris Exposition of 1878. In 1884, he lectured at the Saint-Simon Circle on “Japanese Theatre” with Guimet. In 1899, he visited Japan again to inspect art education. In 1900, he became Secretary General of the Franco-Japanese Society in Paris. Régamey died in 1907. His works include *Les Aventures d'un petit garçon préhistorique*.

Promenades Japonaises has a relaxed, leisurely style. Guimet was interested in Asian art and religion, not so much with a focused purpose, but rather as if he were taking in all that could be captured with a wide-angle camera. He obtained a diplomatic passport for the purpose of inspecting the religious situation in Japan, and he compiled his account of his 3-month stay in Japan in the summer of 1876 (Meiji 9), with numerous drawings by the painter Régamey, in the two volumes of *Promenade*, which were published 2 years later in 1878.

Their arrival is described in detail in the first volume of *Promenade* (Japanese title: *1876 Bonjour Kanagawa*, translated by Aoki Keisuke, Yūringō, July 1977). Under an untimely rain, the ship they had boarded in San Francisco entered Edo Bay. Naked men in passing boats, servants bowing deeply, rowers' rhythmic oarsmanship, inefficient customs inspections ... as soon as they landed in Japan, Guimet entered into the lives of the people there.

We wake up from a Japan that we thought was conventional, to enter, walk, and act in a true, unquestionable Japan, which welcomes us as friends and does not differ in any way from the one we saw in our dreams

Not content to simply pass by the main street out front, he padded to the end of the path, behind the houses. Sometimes he would encounter scenes that would have made the average Westerner cry out “decadence.” In a garden where rods are hung on a bamboo fence and fowls walk in the grass, people are having their midday baths in large and small tubs. Boys spinning parasols, girls squatting close together, and mothers rinsing hand towels all expose their naked bodies to the sun. As he sketched “the most unaffected scenes,” Régamey feels that the Japanese are innocent.

While he does not necessarily approve of the various yardsticks imposed by the West in the course of Westernization, he also is not wholly satisfied with the casual and perfunctory explanations that Japanese people would give him. In particular, when it comes to the official purpose of his religious research, Guimet tries to “visit the temples by myself and to give myself the explanations that I was refused”

because the interpreters and priests at most of the temples and shrines he visits do not provide sufficient answers. This attitude was also evident in his trip to Kamakura, and was maintained in the *Promenades Japonaises*.

In *Promenades Japonaises*, Guimet and Régamey visit the Tokyo neighborhoods of Shinagawa, Ueno, Asakusa, and Shiba and the temples there, take in the paintings of the exotic artist Kawanabe Kyōsai, and attempt a short trip to Nikkō. The city, which has been renamed Tokyo but still retains strong traces of Edo, offers Guimet and Régamey a vividly colorful scene, discounting the view of their fellow countrymen who stated that it “is a dull country, without lines, without horizons.” For example, at a teahouse along a ditch in Shiba, a teahouse girl, wearing “a dress with a white background on which blue butterflies are flying,” wrapping around her waist “a large red crepe belt, [...] combined with a bright purple crepe band, greeted us with a smiling air and showed us how she fed the fish in the pond where rose-colored water lilies were blooming.”

I would have found the scene ravishing, but I held back my enthusiasm. It was certainly an effect of imagination, because Japan has no color!

By not loudly proclaiming the beauty of Japan, but rather modestly and colorfully describing his own experiences, Guimet is perhaps gently protesting against his fellow countrymen who refuse to look at these daily sights and figures.

Still, how beautifully he describes the 1876 Japan! It is no wonder that Guimet was deeply interested in the arts, including visual art and music. His keen sensory observations skillfully capture the colors and sounds that give Régamey's paintings a three-dimensional feel. In some cases, however, sensitivity can be a disadvantage. When they went to a *ryōtei* restaurant named “Kagetsu,” meaning “flowers and moon,” a terrible smell seized them as soon as they entered. “Civilization has not yet introduced odorless systems.” The smell that comes back from time to time in nauseating waves while watching the *geisha* dancing makes him give up and say, “Well, then, let’s watch without breathing.” While Guimet’s bewilderment is amusing, the way he calmly accepts it is brilliant.

In each place he visited, Guimet recounts the stories told about local legends: in Shinagawa, the story of the Akō 47 ronin warriors enshrined at Sengakuji Temple; in Ueno, the story of the dragon at Shinobazu Pond Benten-dō temple; in Asakusa, the story of Ubaga Pond (Old Hag’s Pond); and in Shiba, the story of “four lovers” concerning the origin of the temple there. Since these stories are hearsay, they are naturally bound to contain some misunderstandings. In fact, even in the stories of the Akō 47 ronin warriors, the number of participants appears to be higher than in the usual versions. Nevertheless, the most important point is that he is trying to capture the people who once lived there, and to see the history rooted in the land and perpetuated among the people, rather than focus on visible political and economic events.

Nature is not merely marveled at as scenic beauty:

From the beginning, Japanese people were amazed by the nature that surrounded them. They admired the beneficial soil, the fishy sea; they sincerely thought that gods were concerned to make them happy; [...] they meditated, put the palms of their hands together, bowed and worshipped. To whom?... About what?... All!

Guimet believes that this relationship with nature has brought harmony and simplicity to Japanese art forms.

Even buildings built with artistic or religious intentions can display sublime beauty when they are nestled in nature, among the trees. Such was the case with the main hall of the Tōshōgū shrine in Nikkō. The golden pavilions and granite walls are enhanced by towering trees more than 300 years old. After seeing the tomb of Tokugawa Ieyasu, “I turned around to go down and saw something like an ocean of golden roofs beneath my feet. The trees are shining and vibrant like waves, and the green capes and islets formed by the treetops float out of the ocean.”

When Guimet returned from Nikkō, he encountered a crowd in Nihonbashi that was intoxicated by a festive atmosphere. “Here the gaiety dominates the religious feeling. The devotion has something sprightly and lively.”

The bustle in the midst of the festival reminds us once again of the vibrancy of the people who supported the “promenade” behind the scenes. Régamey’s naked rickshaw men wrap hand towels around their necks, as a nominal observance of an anti-nudity law issued due to foreigners’ complaints. They tirelessly ride their customers to the appointed destinations, and vividly bring back to life the old lifestyle.

Japan does not have enough confidence in the Japanese way of life. It is too quick to wipe out a lot of customs, habits, institutions, and even ideas that made it strong and happy. Perhaps Japan will rethink itself. I hope so for Japan’s sake.

In the year before the Satsuma Rebellion, when old and new values were coexisting and the fragile order was on the verge of collapse, Guimet preserved what he saw as the essence of the Japanese people by capturing their daily lives in vivid detail.

Guimet’s descriptions are supported by Régamey’s drawings. His “single combat” scene with Kawanabe Kyōsai is especially interesting and impressive. For Kyōsai, whose political caricatures had not always been welcomed by the public, Guimet and Régamey’s visit, inspired by his caricatures, must have been very exciting. The portraits that Régamey and Kyōsai left behind of each other are a reminder of their sparkling encounter. Guimet’s impression of the fan painting (a telegraph pole and a frog pulling a rickshaw!) presented by Kyōsai as a gift in return, seem to describe Japan at this time. “This is how, in Japan, the old dogmas are transformed and replaced by new ideas.”

How did the old replace the new? The painter Régamey had the opportunity to find out after 23 years. In January 1899 (Meiji 32), he visited Japan again to study art education in the country. He returned to France after a 3-month stay in Japan and published *Japon* (presumed to have been published after June 1903). An abridged translation of the book is *Nihon sobyō kikō*, which omits the chapters on the journey from Paris to Shanghai, the Sino-Japanese War, and the old and new arts of Japan, and focuses exclusively on Nagasaki, the Seto Inland Sea, Kobe, Yokohama, Tokyo, flowers and scenery, and the state of the landscape and people. Since it was his second visit to Japan, the overall brushwork and ease of the sketches show a more relaxed and observant eye, rather than one dazzled by fresh surprises.

A mirage. The islands seem to dance on the water on the horizon.

Many small wisteria-colored clouds in an orange-tinged sky, covered with white mottled clouds and a cold gray sun setting, are about to disappear into the churning sea of slate-colored and golden waves. Land seems to be approaching nightfall.

It is a beautiful view of the Seto Inland Sea, but even at that time, the boat trip would have been faster than it had been more than 20 years earlier. And the seasonal festivals that used to take place all year round (Régamey gives a brief month-by-month account of these) were “greatly threatened by the inexorable infiltration of our Western civilization.”

Japanese society was undoubtedly changing to the Western way. Still, there were, of course, some aspects that did not change easily. One of them was the way children were treated. Régamey rarely saw Japanese children cry. He may have meant that the Japanese were gentle with children and that Japan was truly children’s paradise. Near a hotel in Tsukiji, Régamey listened to children’s amusement songs and pondered their meaning. He also turned his attention to peddlers selling sweets and *monjayaki* (flat, baked pancake made from a mixture of flour, sauce, and dashi soup stock). In his drawings, we can still see the lively expressions on the faces of the children who crowd around the street vendors, the mothers and children on the train, and the pupils at the elementary school.

His descriptions of funeral rites, which could never have become westernized and have completely changed in Japan since then, are very rare and valuable from our point of view. In Kobe, he witnessed a funeral procession with artificial flowers and bird cages (perhaps for releasing birds), and in Yokohama, he saw a coffin in the shape of a palanquin. With the help of Régamey’s vision, we could well recreate the customs of the time.

The acuity of the artist’s eye can be seen in the precise descriptions of the processes and tools used in the color printing and wallpaper printing processes at the printing house. There seems to be a sense of foreboding that the old-fashioned manual work that guaranteed artistic quality would gradually be swept away by the wave of commercialization. Perhaps because of this, or probably because he himself works with his hands, he has a warm sympathy for carpenters, joiners, nail makers, and other craftsmen.

They will probably never know how much I love them. They also don’t know how much they deserve to be loved. [...] Foolishly, some among us Europeans are, as ever, ungraciously showing them the preferential superiority of our race. I am not one of them!

Walking through the city of Tokyo, with its railroads, the “Twelve Story-Building” in Asakusa, and electric cables crossing the sky, Régamey still discovers much about the lifestyle of the people. He fully recognizes the merits of manmade artefacts that make use of nature, such as flower arrangement and landscape gardening, but he also notes, for instance, how the Tōkaidō Railway, which shortened the 12-day journey from Tokyo to Kyoto to 17 h, was built at the expense of countless trees.

Japan has an abundance of these natural and artistic beauties. And looking at a country like Switzerland, one can imagine how easy it would be to profit from them. [...]

Japan, an empire of kindness and beauty, could be a peaceful meeting place for people from all over the globe, and is in a good position to become the garden of the world.

To survive in the midst of nature, landscape, and beauty, while accepting technological advances and changing values, rather than to separate them from our daily lives: this is timeless advice to those of us living a century after Guimet and Régamey's visit to Japan.

Note: The cut at the beginning of this chapter shows Guimet as drawn by Régamey.

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