

## Artwork of the Month December 2020

### Philip Wilson Steer OM, *The Kimono* (1894)

*Helena Cox, Curator at Beverley Art Gallery and currently completing a Doctorate at the University of York, writes about a small masterpiece gifted to the Gallery by Dean Milner-White*



Philip Wilson Steer, *The Kimono*, oil on canvas, 61 x 22.8 cm  
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This short essay will explore why *The Kimono* - this is the title under which the work is listed in the catalogue of oil paintings in D. S. MacColl's *Life, Work and Setting of Philip Wilson Steer* (1945) - is important for understanding Japonism, and how artists like Steer formed a unique channel of communication between Japan and Europe, transmitting aesthetic ideals, arousing fascination – and spreading misinterpretation!

Philip Wilson Steer (1860 – 1942) was a British painter best known for his association with Impressionism. Between 1882 and 1884 he studied in Paris, first at the Académie Julian, then at the École des Beaux-Arts. His student years in Paris left a lasting impact on Steer, leading him to be one of the founders of the New English Art Club in 1886, and to organise, along with Walter Sickert, the first London Impressionist Exhibition in 1889 in the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly. At this time, Steer was enamoured of light and lively painterly brushstrokes. In 1893 he became an assistant to Frederick Brown at the Slade School, where he taught for almost 40 years. By the year 1900, his style became more conventional, even somewhat contrived, in comparison with his earlier playfulness.

*The Kimono* is one of the hidden gems of York Art Gallery's collection. This oil sketch from 1894 shows Steer's ex-fiancée, Rose Pettigrew, leisurely wearing a vividly coloured Japanese kimono. Steer's command of impressionist style turns the painting into a masterpiece, capturing with seeming ease the delicate beauty of the kimono's embroidered patterns, while conveying the model's pensive and introspective mood.

More than that, the painting links Steer to the international phenomenon of *Japonisme* (the French term is often used), which took the Western world by storm. After over 200 years of separation from the outside world, Japan opened its borders in 1868. While some items of Japanese art found their way to Europe and the United States even before then (such as woodblock prints, famously used for packing porcelain) the sudden exposure to the richness and 'otherness' of Japanese art took European artists by surprise. With its distinct aesthetics, original concepts of beauty, and never-before-seen techniques, Japan turned the Greco-Roman foundations of Western culture upside down. And out of this encounter, the fascination with all things Japanese was born: *Japonisme*.

Almost no artist of the time remained untouched by the phenomenon. From Monet to Van Gogh, from Whistler to Tissot, everyone had a go at

depicting the newly imported items of Japanese craft, and paying homage to the innovative perspective, radical flatness, and brightness of colours seen on *ukiyo-e*, the traditional coloured woodcut prints. At this time, Steer was among those English artists who remained eagerly open to foreign trends, embracing Impressionism, and enjoying experimentation and spontaneity. Adopting a French style of painting, though, was something fundamentally different from embracing Japanese inspirations. Steer's *The Kimono* brings together some of the fundamental ways that Japan was celebrated – but also misunderstood.

Japanese is one of the world's most difficult languages, with three writing systems, the most important one comprising over 5,000 Chinese-based characters. It is not surprising that, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were only a handful of foreigners who could speak the language. This meant that the majority of Japanese items imported to Europe were easily misjudged, and this was certainly the case with kimonos.

Steer's *The Kimono* shows his model wearing the garment as if it was a morning-gown, leisurely letting it hang off her shoulders with the bright red inner rim cascading down along her figure like a waterfall. While this delightful dynamic line certainly works well as the highlight of Steer's composition, it would jar in the eyes of anyone Japanese. A kimono is not just a gown, it is an attire of highly symbolic value, and one that follows strict rules: the inner rim needs to be folded right inside, only made visible in the very upper part of the arrangement. Having the rim uncovered anywhere else would signify indecency. Perhaps this resonates with the model being Steer's ex-fiancée, in other words someone with whom the artist had something other than a professional relationship.

Moreover, the kimono in Steer's painting looks too long for the model, with a notable fold of fabric accumulating at her feet. This is because all kimonos are made the same size, much longer than the average height of its wearers. Getting dressed in a kimono is a lengthy and tricky procedure, especially if it is a festive kimono with rich embroidery, as the white painterly flowers on Steer's work suggest. When fitted around the chest and hips, the kimono is then folded in the waist area, making sure the size of the fold leaves the kimono just the right length. Probably unaware of the intricacies of kimono fitting, Steer's model stands puzzled, letting the seemingly oversized garment roll out over her feet.

Kimonos in Japan range from everyday work clothes to sophisticated gold-embroidered garments, such as the one worn by Claude Monet's

wife on his famous and controversial painting now in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, [La Japonaise](#) from 1876, twenty years before Steer's work. The fact that Monet's work is so much earlier than Steer's shows the persistence of Japonism. Even two decades later artists still did not understand the significance (and the ins and outs, quite literally) of a kimono. Monet's garment was a performance kimono used in traditional Noh theatre, where all actors were strictly only men, and each kimono was decorated with symbols specific to the given play and the role embodied by the actor. Kimonos of this type were highly valued as artworks, never intended for use by the public, and never worn by women. None of this was known to Monet, who used the gown as a fashionable prop, draping it around his wife with no particular interest in its original meaning. Twenty years later, Steer's canvas suggests that little has changed.

Steer's *The Kimono* stands at a symbolic crossroads with regard to his creative expression. A variant of *The Kimono* dated 1896 in the National Gallery of Victoria (Melbourne, Australia), entitled [The Japanese Gown](#), shows a notable shift from impressionism to a more controlled, smoother, more conventional and self-conscious way of painting. This was perhaps in line with the latest trends promoted by the English Art Club, and resonated with the new aesthetics of artists such as Henry Tonks and William Orpen. Steer's style has changed, but the kimono still remained a mere prop, stripped of its cultural meaning and context.

This of course isn't entirely a bad thing. While artists of Japonisme often pay little homage to the 'indigenous' cultural meaning of borrowed items (such as a kimono), they do on the other hand create a new culturally 'hybrid' layer of meaning. The kimono on Steer's sketch is therefore no longer a traditional Japanese item, nor does it fully belong to the European context. This in-between position enables it to exist in a realm of its own, in a place where meaning is not rigidly given, but rather creatively negotiated.

York Art Gallery's version of *The Kimono* is a meeting place for a cultural exchange. A Japanese subject painted by a British artist in a French style, *The Kimono* is a celebration of cross-cultural dialogues, of openness towards the unknown, and eagerness to experience the world from other perspectives. Despite the misunderstandings this can bring, reaching beyond the familiar is surely something worth celebrating.