Dainty Distractions:
the Japan Pavilion at the Golden Gate International Exposition
by Krystal Messer

In the midst of the Great Depression’s stranglehold, as the Dustbowl sparked the collapse of farming communities across the Great Plains and Washington continued to deny that they were on the brink of world war - America played host to eleven World’s Fairs, in just ten years. In true imperialist fashion, these Fairs fiercely promoted nationalism and utopian dreams for the country’s future; while they subtly reinforced racist stereotypes and social formulas. It was the pinnacle of American escapism. The same drive that kept American audiences packing movie palaces for the latest Screwball Comedies, kept them flooding the ticket gates of these Fairs. Distract and Diffuse was the name of the game. Distract the masses from the reality of the situation to diffuse potential fallout from public reaction. The United States was not the only nation to see the benefit of such public policy.

In 1931 Japan bombed a section of their own railway line outside the city of Mukden; they blamed it on Chinese Troops and used the incident as an excuse to invade all of Manchuria. The U.S. paid little attention, mired as they were in their own economic calamity. A month later, on the invitation of the daily Japanese paper Yomiuri, fourteen Major League Baseball players travelled to Japan for a seventeen game exhibition series against local college teams. Press on both sides of the Pacific covered the tour exhaustively; displacing war and economic coverage with public interest stories, at least temporarily. Japan, it seems, was also on to the distraction technique. The conflict in Asia continued to escalate, with little U.S. involvement, until December 1937, when the Japanese Air Force attacked and sank the American Navy gunboat Panay while it was anchored in the Yangtze River outside of Nanjing, China. Survivors were machine-gunned in the water as they tried to swim away. Japan apologized publicly and
profusely, and paid the United States $2.2 million in reparations.

Not long after that, the country became the first foreign nation to formally accept an invitation from the Golden Gate International Exposition Committee to participate in a World’s Fair to be held in San Francisco the following year. Japan then set about planning and building a $1 million Pavilion for the Fair, by far the most expensive foreign building on the fairgrounds. Upon touring the building during the Fair’s run, Dr. Hu Chao Chun from the Museum of Greater Shanghai commented that perhaps Japan had spent so much money on the World’s Fair propaganda because, “they are very much in need of good will at the present time.” It was perhaps their most intricate diversion yet.

The undeclared war between Japan and China had been going on for nearly a decade by the late 1930s, with Japan invading and bombarding their Asian neighbors throughout that time. Yet the Japanese Pavilion at the Golden Gate International Exposition of 1939-1940 on Treasure Island emphasized a very traditional and contradictory concept of Japan. With exhibits that portrayed tea services, silk production, Japanese Opera, dancing, art and ancient artifacts – the impression with which visitors walked away was one of tranquility and peace. This contrasted greatly with Japan’s contemporary reality, as well as with the country’s self-portrayals at earlier World’s Fairs.

During Victorian era Fairs, Japan, seeking to renegotiate treaties with the West, made quite a show of asserting their modernity and technological advancement – staking their claim on the world stage as a contemporary nation-state. Their famed pavilion at the Chicago Exposition of 1893 was so successful that American journalists proclaimed Japan the, ‘Paris of the East.’ They achieved this by both embracing and rejecting certain aspects of Orientalism. In essence they clearly separated the male sphere of society from the female. Women had come to represent
tradition, history and passivity; while masculine displays represented modernity and technology. It was the latter which was emphasized overtly to suit their aims: to achieve equal economic treatment and assert themselves globally. Yet forty years later, on the eve of war with the west, this changed drastically. Men, and thus technology and modernity, are all but absent from the Fair. Portrayed instead were kimono-clad women serving tea and weaving silk, making dolls and dancing. By highlighting the feminine aspects of their culture and obscuring the masculine, Japan was able to codify their country as female and play into the biased notions of Western Orientalism, which leaned towards viewing the East as passive.

The Japanese Pavilion’s focus on tradition and use of women served to downplay their status as a military power by promoting an idealized, feminine and pastoral Japan. Tourists, scholars and businessmen walked away from the Japanese Pavilion with a clear image of ‘modern’ Japan in their heads - and it was a pleasant and tranquil scene. It was also a less-than-accurate depiction. Instead, this was a crafted interpretation of Japanese culture; and it served to assuage Western fears of looming war in the Pacific. The country had engineered World’s Fairs exhibitions before to political ends, and it seized the opportunity to do so again. To quell American anxieties, Japan chose to highlight a primarily fictitious and antiquated present that would prolong the social, military and political stalemate.

Legacy of the Wooded Isle

The Japanisme movement swept Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, after Admiral Perry opened Tokyo Bay with only the silent threats of conflict. Wealthy private collectors were finally readily able to acquire objects from the region. The ‘fictional east’ had
long been established as something fundamentally different; a place that was decadent and uncivilized, but one that ultimately legitimized the west and everyone wanted a piece. vii Upper and middle class Victorians were concerned mainly with display and decoration, not with truly understanding the culture they greedily appropriated for their own amusement.

That is one of the reasons that Japan made such an impact on the American public at the 1893 Columbian Exposition, especially the millions of midwesterners who had little to no previous experience with the culture. Both the Wooded Isle and the Phoenix Pavilion built upon it enchanted the crowds who flocked to the Fair. So impressed were journalists that they claimed Japan to be the ‘Chicago of the Orient’ and likened it to the great cities of Europe. viii At this point Japan was in complete control of their own exhibitions, and the country had lobbied hard for the coveted space on the island. Japan used that space to gain a foothold on the world stage, and renegotiate foreign treaties with western countries, including America. Through Japan’s carefully crafted exposition hall, they were able to achieve a unique articulation of modernity; and thus proclaim themselves to be both a modern nation-state as well as a country having a distinct cultural heritage. ix They rejected the aspects of Orientalism that viewed the East as passive and premodern in their grand Phoenix Pavilion, which was populated solely by men. By separating male spaces from female spaces, the building’s designers were able to present Japan as both modern and masculine, while not abandoning the Japonisme aesthetic that drew crowds.

Elsewhere on the fairgrounds, Japanese women were ensconced in an anachronistic Lady’s Boudoir, where they were depicted clad in kimonos and lounging as passive reservoirs of tradition. Conveniently unconcerned with accuracy in the ways Japanese women were officially portrayed in the famed Women’s Building, such statements set the stage for Japan as selective in both the style and the content of their self-representation. Japanese women were, by this time,
adopting both the dress and customs of Europe and the west. Yet they were portrayed as the antiquated traditional stereotypes of yore. American audiences, eager to exoticize Japan, readily embraced this notion of women as the guardians of tradition.\textsuperscript{xii} Thus, while Japan fought notions of Orientalism on the Wooded Isle, they actively invoked them in the Lady’s Boudoir. They painted their country as simultaneously ancient and modern. Proving that when motivated, the country could willingly exploit the racist expectations of the West in any way. This type of image manipulation came back into play almost fifty years later, on the eve of World War Two, at the Golden Gate International Exposition.

Pageant of the Pacific

In the early 1930s the city of San Francisco embarked on two of the greatest construction projects ever attempted in California: the building of the Golden Gate and Oakland-Bay Bridges. In order to celebrate their completion, city officials began to plan a fantastic Exposition to introduce these feats to the world. Much like the Exposition of 1915 commemorated the city’s rebirth after the devastating earthquake of 1906, which nearly leveled the metropolis, civic leaders hoped a contemporary fair might be fitting. In many ways, the Golden Gate International Exposition was an opportunity for San Francisco to idealize its modern urban identity.\textsuperscript{xii} It was a chance for the city to show the world exactly how it had grown in scale, sophistication and global importance during the early decades of the 20th century.

Between February 1939 and October 1940, the Golden Gate International Exposition was held on manmade Treasure Island in the middle of San Francisco Bay. Banking on the success of the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition and the more recent 1933 Chicago World’s Fair, city officials assumed that a San Francisco Fair would help pull California out of the Great
Depression. The Exposition, following in the footsteps of World’s Fairs before it, included the participation of many foreign countries and hailed its theme and unofficial name as the Pageant of the Pacific. True to this motif, Exposition organizers took great pains to eliminate the ‘otherness’ of international participants through their foundational inclusion of foreign pavilions. Throughout construction of the Fair, officials were in negotiations with foreign countries to participate with exhibits and pavilions. They concentrated their main efforts on those nations surrounding the Pacific Basin. By January of 1939, there were twenty-six countries signed-on to the Exposition. In all, over thirty countries participated fully, among them were Peru, Brazil, New Zealand, Switzerland and Japan. Another seven countries, mostly European, participated in a limited and unofficial capacity. Considering the myriad of political tensions at the time, not to mention the wars in both Europe and Asia, these remain staggering statistics.

Several countries’ displays, such as the Japanese Pavilion, chose to focus on the country’s traditional aspects - which were thought to be more appealing and marketable to American consumers. This approach served not to downplay otherness, as Fair organizers intended, but to reinforce the prevailing cultural stereotypes; thus leading one American magazine to refer to the finished product as, “an exotic chow-chow of the ageless East and the American West.”

Japan Welcomes World Visitors!

Of the thirty-seven foreign countries that participated in the Fair, Japan had the most extensive exhibitions and the most elaborate Pavilion. It was described as a, “picturesque, exquisitely fashioned structure,” and with the absence of an official Chinese showing, Japan became the crown jewel in the Fair’s Pacific Pageant. It had also been the first country to accept San Francisco’s Invitation - and official programs and booklets were printed with, ’By Invitation of the Golden Gate International Exposition,’ on the covers. TIME magazine declared it the best.
international pavilion, adding that it had been, “obviously designed to win U.S. friends.”\textsuperscript{xvii} It was apparently successful, for in 1939 alone the building welcomed more than 4.5 million visitors.\textsuperscript{xviii} In the Fair’s \textit{Official Guidebook}, the pavilion was billed as a place of tranquillity and peacefulness, with, “placid lagoons,” which produced, “a vivid image of the contrast between its past and present age of industrial advance.”\textsuperscript{xxi} Yet, for all its promise of contrast, there was actually very little. A disproportionate majority of the Pavilion was devoted to things feminine, with men and technology all but absent. The image of Japan which it portrayed at the Fair was an exotic, antiquated, bucolic and ultimately anachronistic snapshot of the Island Nation; one that had little to do with reality and much more to do with capturing the imagination of an escapist American public.

Much as they had done with the construction of the Phoenix Pavilion in 1893; the $1 million Japanese Pavilion, a recreation of an actual Pagoda and Feudal Samurai House, had been assembled in Japan, shipped across the Pacific and then built on Treasure Island by thirty-five bluecoat Japanese master-craftsmen.\textsuperscript{xx} The Official Japan Pavilion booklet from 1939 explains that these craftsmen were engaged from, “all parts of the Empire.”\textsuperscript{xxi} It fails to detail what exactly Japan considered to be the scope of its Empire, as their military controlled Manchuria, Korea and parts of China at this time. Details such as this were often glossed-over during the Fair’s run, international participants understandably left their socio-political contretemps outside the entrance gates, known as the \textit{Portals of the Pacific}. Within the Fair, Latin American, Asian and American tensions were seemingly ignored.

Japan participated for the duration of the Fair in 1939 and again in 1940. Despite political and military tensions between the U.S. and Japan, the countries kept a semblance of camaraderie. The Japanese Consul-General and his wife even hosted numerous State functions at the Pavilion
between 1939-1940. Both years there were printed Japan Pavilion Booklets, rife with the rhetoric of peace. They included greetings from the President of the Exposition and the Consulate General of Japan. The Japanese greeting explained the desire of the country to, “promote, first of all, better trade relations with the United States.” The Golden Gate International Exposition echoed that desire to keep friendly relations with their Japanese neighbors. Both years the messages were printed in Japanese and English.

The informational booklets printed for the Japan Pavilion offer insight into the intention of the exhibit spaces; and provide an intriguing glimpse at both the subtle and overt changes which occurred between the 1939 and 1940 seasons. In general, the 1939 booklet is by far more neutral and reserved. The front cover portrays the Pavilion’s front door in 1939, and in 1940 the image is taken from the garden side as two kimono-clad women stroll the grounds. The prose which accompanies the images throughout is printed small in the 1939 edition and refers to the people of Japan in purely abstract terms. In 1940 the fonts are bigger and the prose is more emphatic, with an abundance of exclamation points throughout. The Japanese Government is referred to on nearly every page, as oppose to just once the year before. It is clear they were more decisively branding both the Pavilion and the country as an exotic and peaceful neighbor to the world in general and the United States specifically.

Take the opening paragraphs of each as a comparison, in 1939 it said:

Japan presents her Pavilion to the world and its people visiting the Golden Gate International Exposition on Treasure Island. It is the most magnificent exhibit Japan has ever contributed to an exposition in a foreign land.

The next year, it read:

The Japanese Government and the people of Japan welcome you as you enter the Japan Pavilion at the Golden Gate International Exposition. This Pavilion is designed to show the grace, dignity and simplicity of Japanese architecture. Its wide
doors are open to the world in the spirit of Japanese hospitality. Its gardens and exhibits are for your enjoyment.xxv

In the 1940 opening Japan no longer extends itself as an autonomous purveyor of curtesy, moreover it is clear to specify that the Japanese Government comes first before the people - implying that this is an obedient and tightly run country. The 1940 booklet continues to state that the Japanese Government, “gladly accepted President Roosevelt’s invitation to continue its exhibits as an outstanding part of the Exposition on Treasure Island.”xxvi In reality, the U.S. Government had nothing to do with the selection of the participating countries, and in 1940 Roosevelt certainly had larger issues to preoccupy himself with. Nothing about the President was mentioned in the 1939 booklet. It is logical then, to assume that the revised booklet produced for the second year of the Fair was Japan’s response to rising tension between the two countries, and an effort to calm Americans’ anxieties - ironically, through a more assertive proclamation of peace and goodwill.

Likewise, the closing statements of each booklet left a final impression with the visitor. The 1939 version is demure and understated, while the 1940 edition is decisively positive.

The former stated:

Once again, the Japanese people extend to you a most cordial invitation to meet them in delightful Japan - temporarily transplanted to Treasure Island.xxvii

The latter read:

The Japanese Government and the people of Japan extend a hearty welcome to the people of the world visiting her Pavilion on Treasure Island.

“Sayonara! Come Again!”xxviii

Yet again, the Government makes its official supervision known, in essence it is directly laying claim to everything presented within the Pavilion. Thus marking what unfolds therein to
be authentic and true, at least in the eyes of the Empire. What transpired within the Japan Pavilion can then be examined as an official state narrative, or at the very least an officially sanctioned account of Japanese culture.

The Japan Pavilion

Once inside the Japanese Pavilion, visitors found a number of displays supposedly detailing modern Japanese life. The first of which was the Silk Room, the Pavilion’s single most popular attraction. Every step of production, “from the cocoon to the finished product,” was on display. The whole process was explained by Nipponese ‘silk girls’ in colorful kimonos, replicas of which could be purchased in the gift shop next door, in true consumerist fashion. The daily demonstrations were a crowd-pleaser that, “never lost its savor,” with audiences. The Silk Room included an alcove displaying a glass enclosed living room furnished in western style, but utilizing Japanese silk. This room was suppose to be typical of the, “phase of home life in modern Japan.” The room was inhabited by three figures of Japanese women, a mother and her two daughters; all of whom were dressed in traditional formal kimonos, seemingly just for sitting around the house. There was no accompanying explanation as to the dress, just the statement that these are modern Japanese women.

In reality, at this point, Eastern women had been dressing in the Western style for over fifty years and would have only worn outfits such as these for special ceremonies or pageants, certainly not to just lounge around the home. American audiences, always eager and willing to exoticize the East would have taken this at face value. Nowhere in the Pavilion were there obvious depictions of men, only women and occasionally children - for special festivals and
ceremonies. Although male master-craftsmen had built the Pavilion, they were gone from the
grounds long before the gates to the Fair ever opened.

Beyond the *Silk Room* lay the *Industial Arts Room*, the one area where surely Japan’s,“present state of industrial advance,”xxxiv would be displayed, as promised in the *Official
Guidebook*. What was actually presented in this space were objects which had been produced by
the country for thousands of years. Items such as porcelain, dolls, parasols, baskets and fans were
shown, and their production processes detailed.xxxv Not only were these crafts that had been
produced ritualistically the same way for centuries, but also they were objects associated with
women and the Japanese feminine aesthetic. There was nothing technically ‘Industrial’ about
them, at least not in any Western connotation of the term. Yet again, the masculine and the
modern are hidden while the feminine and the antiquated are openly displayed.

Likewise, the *Transportation and Communication Room* of the 1939 season, another
opportunity to display the modern advancements of Japan, failed to live up to its implied
promises. The Pavilion’s booklet talks of developments of communication and transportation in
the modern world, and specifically declares that, “special efforts have been made, in
collaboration with various departments of the Japanese Government, to show in this room
progress made by Japan in the field of transportation.”xxxvi Actually displayed in the room was a
case full of various lengths of cables, highlighting, “Japanese progress in the technique of cable
manufacturing.”xxxvii Additionally, there was a section for specially designed postage stamps, a
wall of *Yedo Period* scrolled stationary and a map of steamship lines across the Pacific. All of
this is hardly cutting-edge on the fronts of either communication or transportation. It is little
wonder that the room was unpopular and retooled for the 1940 season.
The space came back the following year as the *Hall of Culture*, in which surrealist murals titled “Present Day Japan” covered the walls. These images were close-up shots of giants hands making crafts, overlaid on top of pastoral scenes of the Japanese countryside. Filling the room were nine glass cases containing examples of Japanese culture. Three of these cases contained costumes and make-up for Japanese Opera, Kabuki theater and the like. Another contained ladies’ kimono accessories, while two more displayed ancient Japanese printing and bookbinding. One case contained toy-sized models of the Japanese planes ‘Nippon’ and ‘Wings of the Century’ which had set world records in 1939, and that case was situated near two other cases containing *actual* children’s toys. While it is true that all of these objects were examples of Japanese culture, it cannot be understated how misleading it was to equate the majority of these items with *present day* Japan - a country every bit the equal of the United States as far as technology, weaponry and industrial advancement. Once more, the modern is obscured for the sake of a carefully crafted national identity.

Beyond the formal walls of the Pavilion, Japan hosted many pageants, festivals and shows in the surrounding garden and stage area. These productions showcased traditional Japanese dances, opera and theater. Dorothy Takata, a Bay Area resident of Japanese descent, danced at the Japanese Pavilion several times a month during the Fair’s run, with a local ethnic dance troupe. “I always danced there with a group of girls,” she recalls, “all girls.” She describes how the dancers had to wear authentic traditional kimonos at all times while at the Fair, and how the girls were to be made-up with powdered faces and intricately lacquered hair. Contemporary street-clothes would have broken the illusion that typical Japanese women roamed the streets dressed as geishas. They gave an escapist and imaginative Western audience what it wanted and expected of the East.
It is clear that most Americans were not viewing Japan as a military threat at this time, and why should they, given the way the country was being unquestioningly presented to them: as an exotic, peaceful, traditional nation that just happened to be one of our best customers. The same racist principals of Orientalism which had caused white Victorian women to dismiss Asian women as romantic rivals, were invoked again to dissuade any American thoughts of defense rivalry. Furthermore, beyond mere invocation by Japan’s mise en scène of tranquility at the Fair, these archetypes were being reinforced by an American press either unwilling or unable to question what was placed in front of them. Furthermore, news magazines often spoke of the “China Incident” in flippant, cursory tones; one even chalked the whole thing up to mere population pressure, “so many people, on such dinky islands.” In countless articles Japan’s display at the fair is written of in abstract, inconsequential terms - as the stuff of fairy-tales. In its initial piece on the opening of the Golden Gate International Exposition, TIME magazine declared it to be, “an imaginative, quasi-Oriental Never-Never Land.” It was a venue of diversion, not a platform for international diplomacy - at least in the esteem of the U.S.. Apparently Japan saw things differently, and they used that disparity to their advantage.

Conclusion: The End of an Era

Over 17 million people attended the Fair in its two-year run, although in the end the Golden Gate International Exposition could not claim any profits. Exposition officials had tried to streamline the 1940 reincarnation of the Fair, but with war seemingly inevitable in Europe, attendance fell off steadily. At the end of the 1940 season, the Fair closed its gates permanently. Originally, Treasure Island was to be the site for the new San Francisco airport. However, airplanes had changed so much since the island had been built that it was no longer practical for
commercial aircraft use. The island was turned over to the U.S. Navy, and the fairgrounds stood abandoned as the bureaucracy decided how best to use the land and structures.\textsuperscript{xlv}

December 7, 1941 sped up the process considerably. Within weeks of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, every structure, save for the Administration Building and two airplane hangers, was demolished.\textsuperscript{xiv} This included the Japan Pavilion, which had been built with wooden spikes in lieu of nails - so that it could have stood for, “centuries.”\textsuperscript{xlvii} As it was, the Pavilion did manage to outlast the U.S.-Japan goodwill it was meant to symbolize. The delicate truce with which the U.S. and Japan had existed in harmony for decades had finally fractured. In the reality the Pacific Conflict had escalated at normal to slow speed, with U.S. involvement becoming more inevitable every day.\textsuperscript{xlvii} The very fact that the American public was shocked by Pearl Harbor stands as a testament to their utter distraction in the years leading up to war. Bombarded by the grim economic realities of the Great Depression for over a decade at this point, they had been primed to indulge in the escapist diversion that was their main solace. Japan seized the opportunity to further lull them into a false sense of security, through its self-depiction on the fairy-tale fairgrounds the Golden Gate International Exposition. Americans eagerly consumed the fantasy.

The Japan Pavilion on Treasure Island emphasized a very traditional concept of Japan. Exhibits which portrayed opera, tea services and silk production, gave the impression that the mainstays of modern Japanese culture were pastoral, antiquated and ultimately feminine. Visitors walked away pleased and at peace, even those who knew better. Dr. Hu Chao Chun, whose country had been at war with Japan for nearly a decade, thoroughly enjoyed the Pavilion, “strangely enough.”\textsuperscript{xlviii} What Fairgoers saw contrasted greatly with both Japan’s contemporary reality, as well as with the country’s self-portrayals at earlier Fairs.

Japan had proven once again, that they were capable of mass cultural machinations. Their
culture could be portrayed as ancient or modern, as gendered or neutral - and on the eve of World War II, it appeared to be in their best interests socially, economically and militarily to portray it in a benign and romanticized fashion. To distract the American public, they gave them what they expected of the *ageless East*, by embracing the West’s mythical notions of the region. Japan played into the very Orientalist stereotypes which they had been fighting for decades; but ones of which they knew Americans were still enthusiastically accepting.

Walter LaFaeber. *The Clash: A History of U.S.-Japanese Relations* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997): 166. LaFaeber’s account of the relationship between the two countries is purely political and military in focus, though thorough and detailed. Grippentrog echoes many of LaFaeber’s assertions but extends them into a cultural context, providing a useful bridge for this paper.

Carlos E. Cummings. *East is East and West is West* (New York: Buffalo Museum of Science, 1940): 370. Cummings attended both the New York and San Francisco World’s Fairs for a month each, in exhaustive research, to write a comparison for the Buffalo Museum of Science. His 400 page tome is invaluable for scholars of this topic.


This name came from a public contest held by the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1938, which received over 45,000 entries.

Rubens: 38.

Rubens: 61.


Official Guidebook (1939) 87.


Carpenter: 83.

*Japan Pavilion Booklet* (1940) np.


*Japan Pavilion Booklet* (1940): np.

Ibid.


Japan Pavilion Booklet (1940): np.


Cummings: 276.


Bernstein: 7. The beginnings of gendered modernization in Japan began in the latter half of the 19th century, with involvement by the official Meiji Government.


*Japan Pavilion Booklet*, (San Francisco: 1939): 10. This is the one and only mention of the Japanese Government printed in the 1939 booklet. The following year the Japanese Government would be mentioned on nearly every page.

Ibid.

*Japan Pavilion Booklet* (1940): np.

Carpenter: 39.

Newspapers routinely referred to Japan’s invasion of China as an ‘adventure’ until the brutalities of Nanking came to light in late 1937.

“Foreign News: Women in Wartime” *TIME* (August 21, 1939)


Michael Grey, “Art Deco Oasis,” *IMAGE* (San Francisco: 1992) 23. Treasure Island would stay a Naval Base until 2001, when it was privately purchased by developers with the intention of building a planned community that has yet to materialize.

LaFaeber likens the years 1937-1941 to an irreversible ‘*Slipknot*’ which would eventually strangle the relationship between the U.S. and Japan.

Cummings: 370.