



Exhibiting Japan: Displays and Narratives of Japanese Graphic Design in Paris and Bologna

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Keywords:

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ABSTRACT:

In Europe, between 2025 and 2026, the exhibitions *Manga. Tout un art! De la tradition japonaise à la pop culture* at the Musée Guimet in Paris and *Graphic Japan: From Hokusai to Manga* at the Museo Civico Archeologico in Bologna celebrated Japanese culture through the valorization of its long and prestigious graphic tradition, retracing the impact and influences that nearly three hundred years of history have had on numerous contemporary artistic productions that have enjoyed extraordinary international success. Through the analysis and comparison of the museographic and museological aspects of these two exhibitions, this article aims to examine the contemporary relevance of their curatorial features, narrative choices, and the exhibition challenges these display projects are called upon to address. In particular, it seeks to highlight how the intersection of different perspectives, media, techniques, and materials now lies at the core of an exhibition storytelling approach that strives to clearly weave a dense and complex network of connections between art and fashion, myth and history, economy and culture, and East and West.

In Europa, a cavallo tra il 2025 e il 2026, le mostre *Manga. Tout un art! De la tradition japonaise à la pop culture* al Museo Guimet di Parigi e di *Graphic Japan da Hokusai al manga* al Museo Civico Archeologico di Bologna, hanno celebrato la cultura giapponese attraverso la valorizzazione della sua lunga e prestigiosa tradizione grafica, ritracciando l'impatto e le influenze che quasi trecento anni di storia hanno avuto su numerose produzioni artistiche contemporanee dal grandissimo successo internazionale. Attraverso l'analisi e il confronto degli aspetti museografici e museologici di queste due mostre, questo contributo vuole quindi osservare l'attualità delle caratteristiche curatoriali, delle scelte narrative e delle sfide espositive che questi progetti di allestimento sono portati ad affrontare. In particolare, si vuole sottolineare come l'incrocio tra sguardi, supporto, tecniche e materiali differenti sia oramai al centro di uno storytelling espositivo che cerca di tessere in modo chiaro una fitta e complessa rete di collegamenti tra arte e moda, tra mito e storia, tra economia e cultura, tra oriente e occidente.

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Opening Picture:

Dior dress inspired by Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, exhibited at the Musée Guimet in Paris. Photo of the authors.

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Two major exhibitions have recently and simultaneously celebrated Japanese culture in Europe, and above all its long and prestigious graphic tradition. These are *Manga. Tout un art! De la tradition japonaise à la pop culture* at the Musée Guimet in Paris¹ and *Graphic Japan: From Hokusai to Manga* at the Museo Civico Archeologico in Bologna.²

Both exhibition projects are part of a broader and long-standing museological interest in Japan in the West,³ one that continues to be explored not only as an object of art-historical study but as a complex cultural system capable of intertwining tradition and contemporaneity, canonized languages and productions of popular and mass culture.

This article therefore aims to examine, through the similarities and differences between these two case studies, the relationship between certain curatorial features and the ways in which narrative choices and the exhibition-related challenges of the materials were translated into the architectural design of exhibition routes and displays. The focus is on the storytelling strategies adopted, highlighting how exhibition design actively participates in the construction of the narrative and in the mediation of content. Within this perspective, fashion in particular is taken up as an interpretive prism through which to observe the different ways in which the two exhibitions articulate the dialogue between Japanese graphic tradition and contemporary visual culture,⁴ acting as a shared language capable of engaging diverse audiences with differing levels of expertise, expectations, and familiarity with Japanese visual culture.

Architectural Design Between Narrative Models and Museographic Solutions⁵

In the critical comparison between these two museographic experiences, a first aspect that is important to underscore is that, in both cases, the realization of the exhibition design project was entrusted to well-known local studios that had already, in one way or another, had the opportunity to work on related themes and within spaces similar to those of these two recent exhibitions. This prior experience and accumulated knowledge had a strong impact on the remarkable effectiveness with which the complex spaces of the Musée Guimet and the Museo Civico Archeologico of Bologna were utilized.

The exhibition design for the Paris show was developed by Naori Tamazoe and the AtoY studio. After graduating in Tokyo, Naori Tamazoe began her career at prestigious architecture firms such as Jean Nouvel and Lacaton & Vassal, and collaborated on numerous museum-related projects, including the construction of the Louvre-Lens with SANAA. In 2014 she founded AtoY, and since then her agency has specialized in the creation of exhibition scenography, often directly connected to both traditional and contemporary Japanese culture.⁶ Among these projects is *Japonorama. Nouveau regard sur la création contemporaine* at the Centre Pompidou-Metz,⁷ whose exhibition design⁸ traced the evolution of contemporary Japanese art from the 1970s onward through works of art, design, architecture, and fashion. On that occasion, the architect emphasized the need to establish coherence

between the artists' work and the forms of the museum display:

*Les espaces, tantôt anguleux, tantôt courbes, s'adaptent aux différentes sections, en cohérence avec le travail des artistes. Les sections sont différenciées à l'aide de rideaux translucides qui permettent de deviner la suite de l'exposition.*⁹

Already in this instance, graphic artworks were juxtaposed with haute couture garments, a *fil rouge* that, as will be discussed, recurs frequently in numerous exhibition designs devoted to Japan. With regard to this specific aspect, one may also recall *Un bestiaire japonais* at the Maison de la culture du Japon in Paris,¹⁰ a fully immersive experience centered on the Edo period and the everyday life of its artistic expressions. Another recurring theme in exhibitions produced by the AtoY studio is the fundamental relationship between Japanese aesthetics and the West, which emerged most clearly in the exhibition *Japon – japonisme. Objets inspirés 1867–2018* at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.¹¹ Here, the aim of the exhibition design was to highlight the extraordinary richness of the museum's Japanese art collections while simultaneously demonstrating the continuity of Japanese influence on Western artistic creation through art objects, design pieces, textile works, and graphic arts.

To better understand the exhibition choices made in the Paris show, it is important to recall that the National Museum of Asian Arts is itself relatively small, and that temporary exhibitions are now almost al-

ways entirely located on the underground level.¹² The exhibition space is particularly low, and in the case of many exhibitions it becomes necessary to create a large number of transverse panels which, while allowing the galleries to accommodate more works, often make the visitor's route appear tortuous. The reduced height of the spaces also generates significant additional challenges: not only in terms of a potential sense of overcrowding, but especially with regard to lighting,¹³ which in these conditions becomes more difficult to manage. Closely connected to the spaces of the Musée Guimet – practically the same ones now occupied by *Manga. Tout un art!* – was the exhibition *L'arc et le sabre. Imaginaire guerrier du Japon*,¹⁴ devoted to the different perceptions – between myth and history – of samurai warriors, and in particular to the evocation of the famous events of the forty-seven ronin. Already in that case, the relationship between the country's historical and mythological culture and its more recent popular production was central to certain displays in which toy figurines of Darth Vader and the Power Rangers were exhibited,¹⁵ both of whose armors were partly inspired by those of the samurai. These are precisely the recurring elements in AtoY's exhibition designs that reappear in the conception of *Manga. Tout un art!*: the close relationship between history and pop culture, the juxtaposition of art and fashion, and the formal coherence between the works on display and the design of the exhibition layout.

The design of the Italian exhibition, instead, was overseen by the architect and well-known designer Paolo Capponcelli¹⁶ together with his son,

the architect Filippo Capponcelli, of Panstudio Architetti Associati. Founded in the early 1980s, the studio has focused primarily on museographic design for both public and private clients involved in cultural promotion, including public administrations, universities, religious institutions, foundations, and companies specializing in the production of exhibition events. In the Bologna area in particular, Panstudio has realized the Museo Civico Medievale, the expansion of the Pinacoteca Nazionale, the Museo e la Biblioteca Internazionale della Musica,¹⁷ the Urban Park of Piazza Maggiore, and the renovation of the former Sala Borsa. In addition, the studio has also curated other exhibitions devoted to Japan, such as *Giappone. Storie d'amore e guerra* at Palazzo Albergati,¹⁸ where more than 200 works paid homage to masters of *ukiyo-e* such as Hiroshige, Utamaro, Hokusai, and Kuniyoshi. In that case, drawing primarily on the visual suggestions of polychrome woodblock prints, the narrative of the emergence of *ukiyo-e* and the famous *shunga* prints, the visitor's itinerary unfolded between the female universe of geisha and *ōiran* and the fascination of samurai warriors.¹⁹ In the same spaces that now host *Graphic Japan*, the exhibition *Hokusai Hiroshige. Oltre l'onda. Capolavori dal Museum of Fine Arts di Boston* was held in 2018 at the Museo Civico Archeologico, likewise organized by MondoMostre and Skira.²⁰ The Museo Civico Archeologico of Bologna is characterized by spaces that are significantly higher than those of the Musée Guimet – indeed, they are extremely tall spaces that present a distinct set of challenges during the exhibition design phase.²¹

A first issue concerns the museum's perimeter walls, which resemble a veritable “Gruyère cheese,” in that the free surfaces available for displaying works are in fact far fewer than those that appear visually accessible. Fan coil units, access points to inspection shafts, security systems, fire prevention equipment, and emergency exits create a series of “voids” in front of which it is not possible to hang artworks, place display cases, or construct new partition walls. Another architectural issue requiring resolution stems from the fact that both visitor entry and exit occur at the same point, making it necessary to create an invisible “traffic divider” that also incorporates the exhibition bookshop area. In this case, the problem was addressed through the construction of a long, iconic entrance wall that, on one side, welcomes visitors with a display of selected introductory materials and works, and, on the other side, creates a narrow exit corridor (Fig. 1).

When analyzing the exhibition design projects themselves, several overarching similarities between the two exhibitions are evident from their very titles, which in both cases emphasize the intention to use the pop culture of manga and contemporary graphic production as a starting point for a complex narrative intertwining and mobilizing myths, traditions, and subjects, as well as traditional dress and fashion, with the aim of offering an economic, artistic, and social prism through which to interpret Japanese culture. The issue of the pronounced typological diversity of the works on display and of the variety of supports dedicated to them – central to both exhibitions – fur-

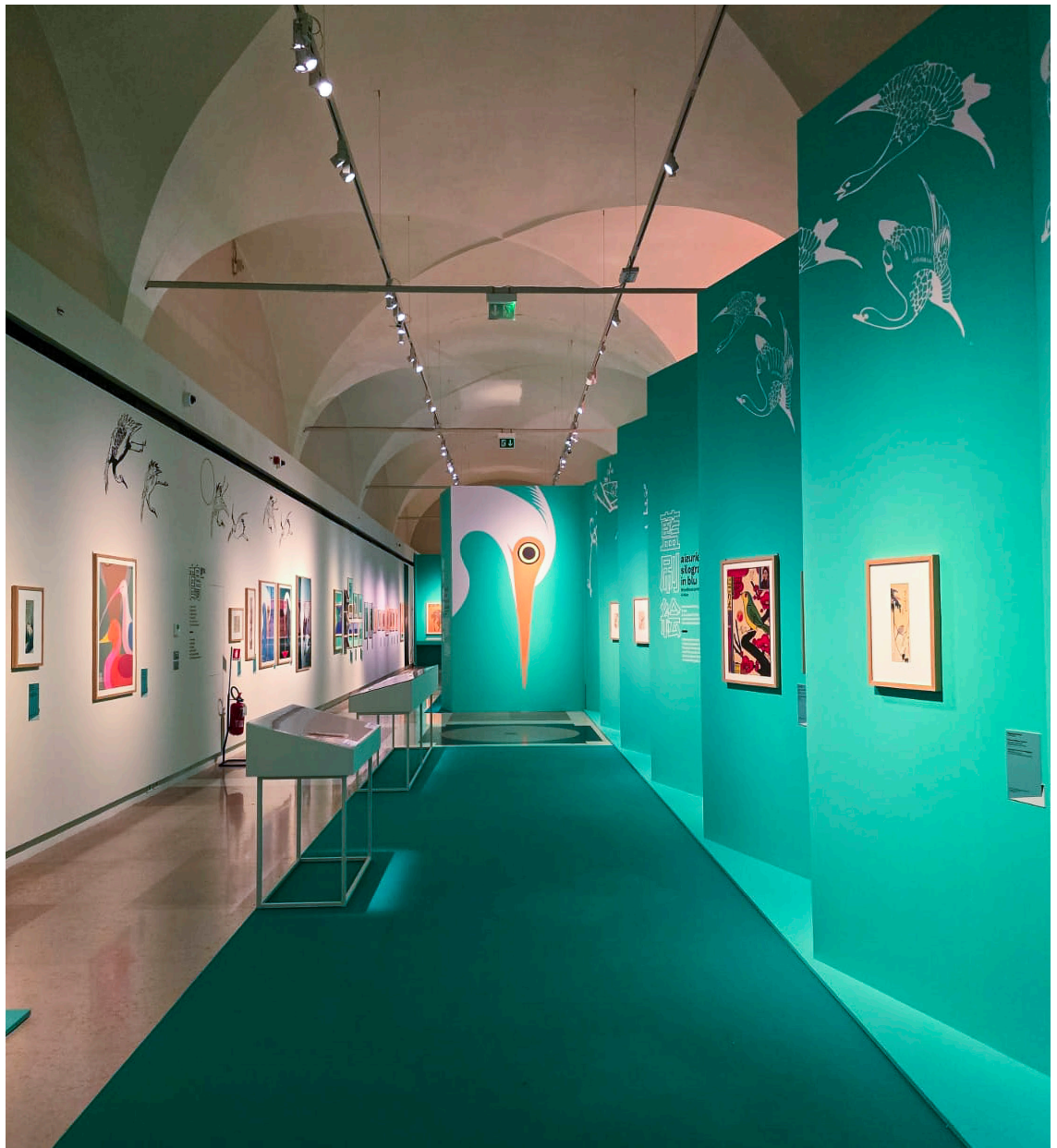


Fig. 1: Entrance of the exposition *Graphic Japan: From Hokusai to Manga* at the Museo Civico Archeologico in Bologna. Photo of the authors.

ther underscores the essential role of architectural exhibition design in shaping and enabling the perception of a complex network of visual connections, recurring symbols, and intersecting gazes among objects that are extremely heterogeneous in nature.

In this context, two technical display strategies appear particularly effective in facilitating the simultaneous perception of this network of *filles rouges*. On the one hand, the use of crisp, sharply defined lighting at the Musée Guimet allows the visitor's

visual field to be framed and selectively focused, guiding the gaze and thereby emphasizing significant aspects, recurring details, and repeated elements (Fig. 2). On the other hand, the use of diagonal vertical elements arranged in a zigzag pattern within the Museo Civico Archeologico of Bologna makes it possible to create unexpected sightlines and to visually connect multiple points of the exhibition simultaneously with greater ease than in more conventional orthogonal layouts²² (Fig. 3).

The emergence of the strong architectural identity of the Bologna installation originates in fashion and, more specifically, draws inspiration from pleating techniques and from the work of Issey Miyake²³ (Fig. 4). From this perspective, two kimonos by the Japanese designer, positioned at the ends of one of the central galleries, function as a “hinge of connection” for the exhibition as a whole. These works, which combine traditional and modern graphic elements through a technique that merges the folding of fabric with the folding of paper, make it possible to achieve coherence – as Naori Tamazoe had emphasized – between the artists’ work and the forms of the exhibition layout. These folded-panel displays, which also find resonance in some of the historical accordion-folded scrolls featured in the exhibition, made it possible to develop the entire show in a unified and recognizable manner by concentrating on a few fundamental principles. On the one hand, the architect sought to keep the perimeter walls of the exhibition space as free as possible, concentrating display elements at the center of the galleries; on the other, the aim was to develop a simple, essential, and contemporary project. Although the elements designed by Panstudio conceal an extremely meticulous study of construction details that make their realization possible (Fig. 5), they were conceived to be structurally simple – thanks to the angled arrangement of the vertical panels, which largely eliminates the need for additional supports – and to create a large number of thematic micro-sections with a minimal number of panels. This minimalist approach, which nonetheless emerges from a complex de-



sign process, not only enables the creation of a clear and easily legible path for visitors²⁴, but also allows for significant material savings, with a substantial impact on both the economic and environmental costs of these temporary exhibitions (Fig. 6). This reflection on the careful use of materials was, in the case of *Graphic Japan*, extended to the use of carpeting as well. Whereas in previous exhibitions at the Museo Civico Archeologico of Bologna the floors had been entirely covered with new, colored carpeting, in this instance it was decided to use smaller sections of carpet, precisely positioned so as to echo the patterns and decorative motifs already present in the galleries’ floors²⁵ (Fig. 7).

Fig. 2: Display dedicated to young girls’ mangas in the exhibitions *Manga. Tout un art! De la tradition japonaise à la pop culture* at the Musée Guimet in Paris. Photo of the authors.



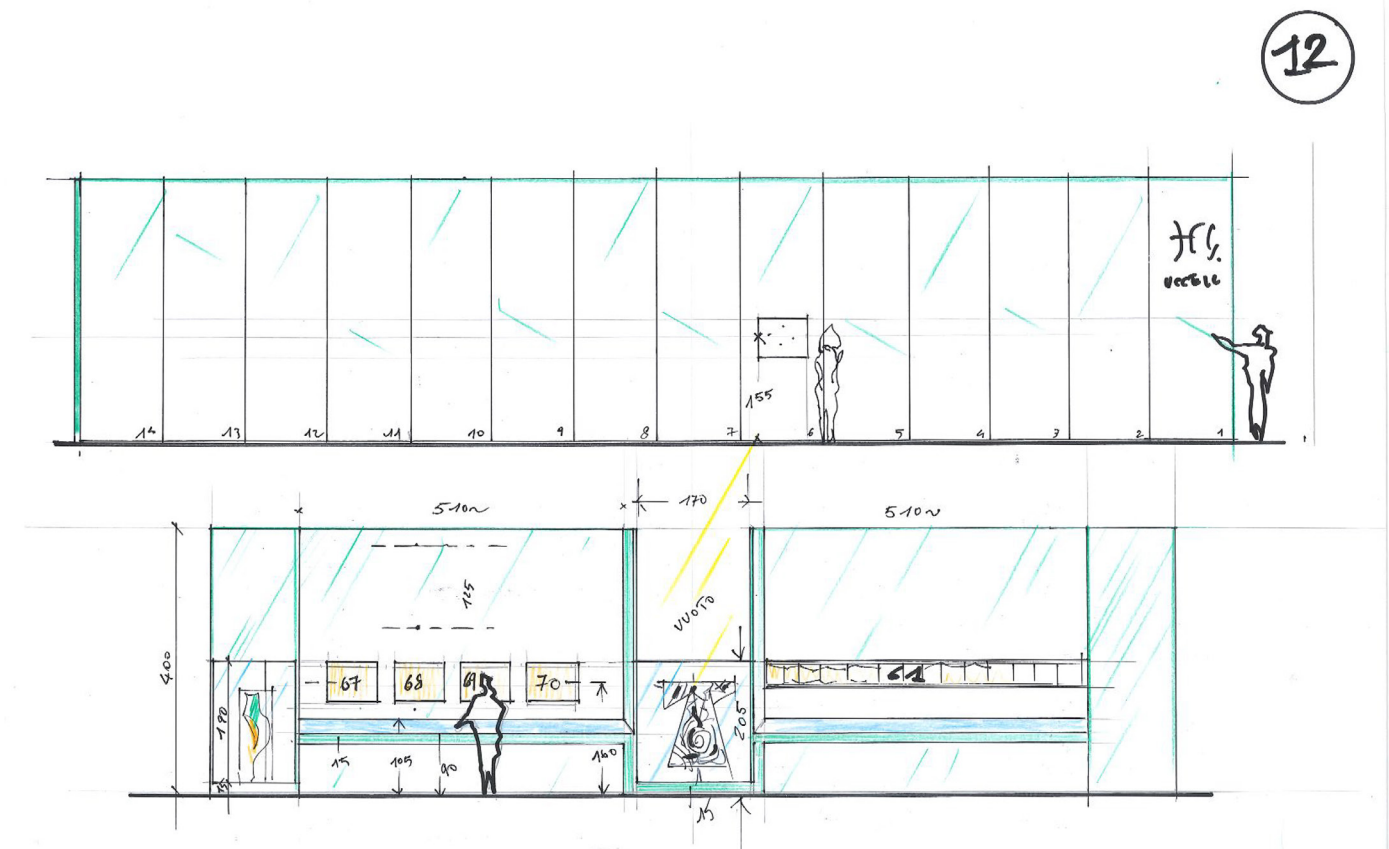
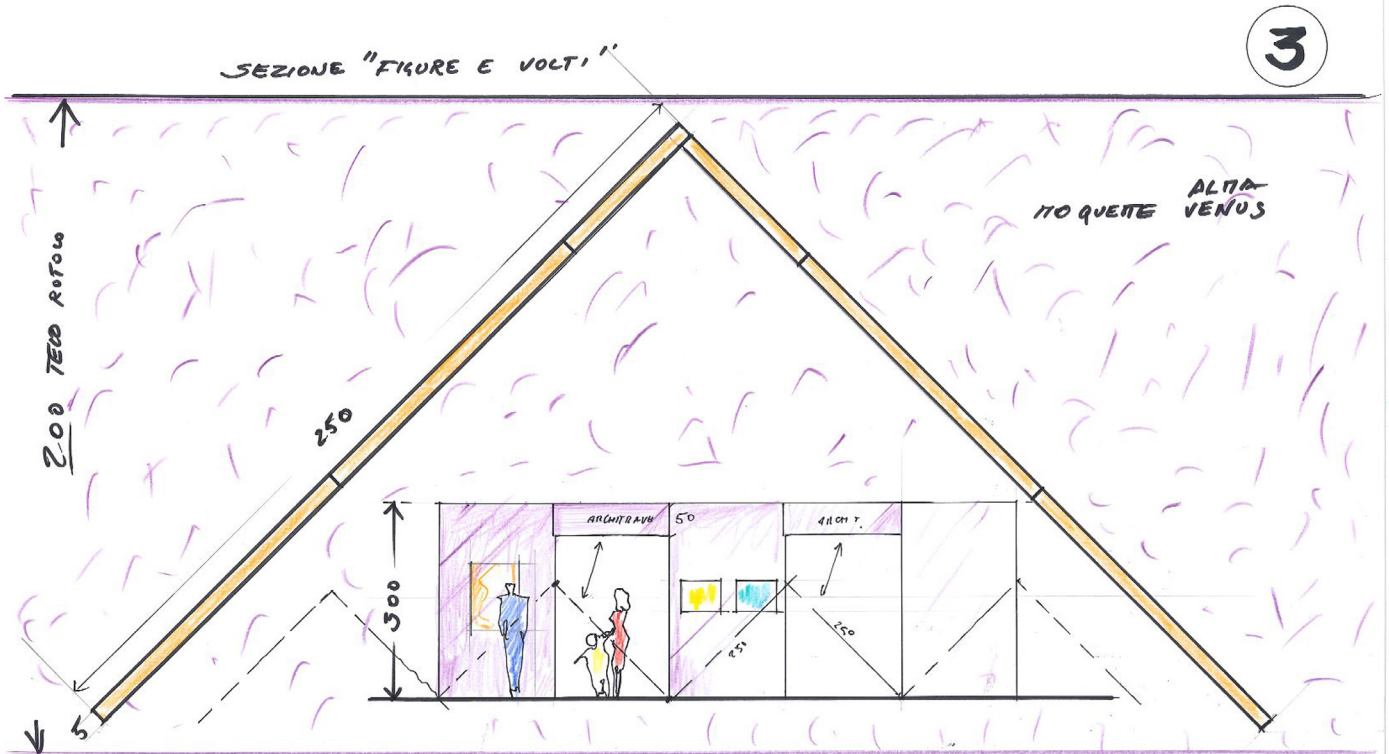
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Fig. 3:
*Graphic Japan:
From Hokusai
to Manga* at the
Museo Civico
Archeologico in
Bologna. Photo of
the authors.

Fig. 4:
*Graphic Japan:
From Hokusai
to Manga* at the
Museo Civico
Archeologico in
Bologna. Photo of
the authors.



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Other display choices shared by the two exhibitions appear to derive directly from the nature of the objects on view. It is difficult not to notice the almost identical display cases in which idealized bookshelves filled with manga and other related objects are recreated (Fig. 8–9). Similarly, both exhibitions feature a number of showcases extending several meters in length, designed to present certain paper scrolls – rebound as accordion-fold books – in their entirety (Fig. 10). This is a particular case not only because of the dimensions of the materials on display, but also because of the way they are read, from right to left, which therefore requires specific curatorial adjustments: at the Musée Guimet, for example, a label accompanied by an arrow reminds visitors of the correct reading order. The artistic model and editorial process of manga, whose modern definition is commonly traced back to Katsushi-



ka Hokusai,²⁶ are thus presented by moving beyond the theme of comic drawing alone, which is nevertheless articulated in both exhibitions as a fully-fledged artistic form. The aesthetics of Hokusai's prints and the graphic legacy²⁷ of the *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*, and in particular of works such as *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*,²⁸ invite viewers to reflect on the long genesis and aesthetic continuity of products that today also possess considerable commercial value.²⁹ Alongside this historical reflection, another theme that runs through the galleries of both exhibitions concerns the relationship with the West in terms of aesthetics, myths, and perhaps above all ways of engaging with Japan's cultural heritage – an exhibition narrative that, nevertheless, follows different paths and structures in each case, from which a particularly fruitful comparison can emerge.

Fig. 7:
Graphic Japan: From Hokusai to Manga at the Museo Civico Archeologico in Bologna. Photo of the authors.

Fig. 8:
Graphic Japan: From Hokusai to Manga at the Museo Civico Archeologico in Bologna. Photo of the authors.



Fig. 9: *Manga. Tout un art! De la tradition japonaise à la pop culture* at the Musée Guimet in Paris. Photo of the authors.

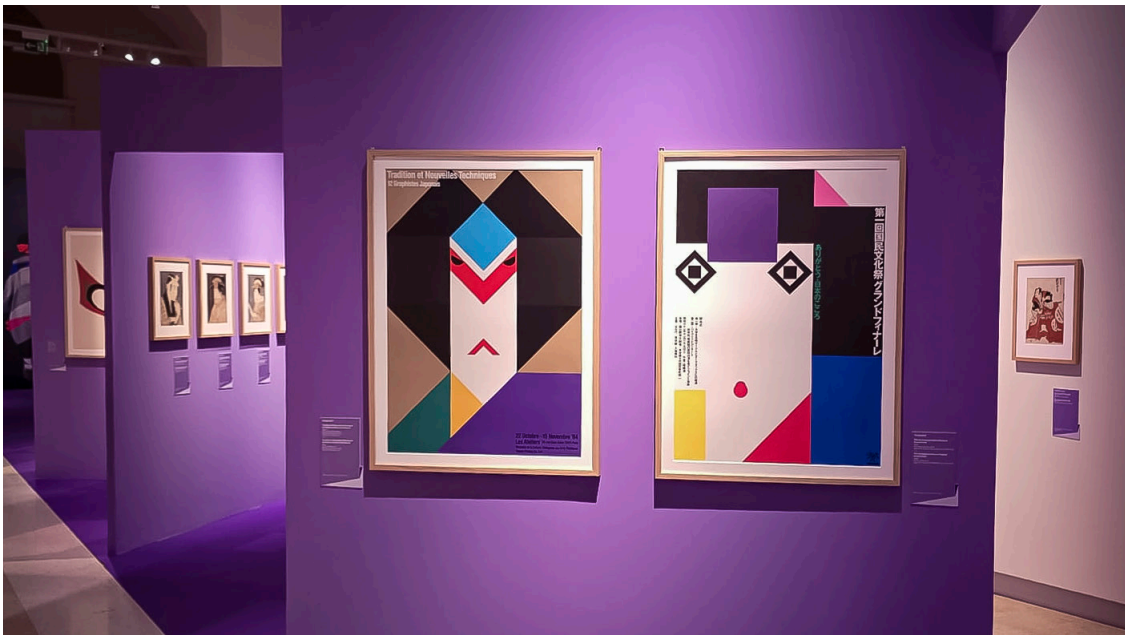
While both exhibitions clearly originate from a desire to investigate the reasons behind the enduring success of Japanese graphic production and to highlight the evolution of its techniques, materials, and iconographies, beyond these initial similarities the differences are in fact numerous. Like an origami, the routes of both exhibitions unfold through the alternation of different “folds,” within which, however, the division of works follows criteria that profoundly differentiate the perspectives brought to bear on the objects on display. In Paris, manga constitute the true focus of the exhibition, which is developed largely according to an author-based structure.³⁰ In Bologna, by contrast, manga represent the point of arrival of a path organized not so much by authors as by subjects, articulated through four thematic sections: *Motifs of Nature, Faces and Masks, Calligraphy and Typography*, and

Japonisme (Fig. 11).³¹

The itinerary of *Manga. Tout un art!* therefore follows a chronological order in which display elements act both as separators and as connective hinges between authors from different periods, alternating – through the use of color – distinct triangular monographic galleries. While color also plays an important role in *Graphic Japan* as a means of distinguishing the exhibition’s main sections, in this case it remains much more uniform within the galleries, where the existing architectural elements generate a fluid route and a continuous spatial environment in which groups of related works can be easily identified through a limited number of clear display devices. The element that most clearly differentiates the two exhibitions, however, is the curatorial gaze and the exhibition strategies associated with fashion objects. Whereas in



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Bologna traditional and contemporary kimonos are displayed in simple vitrines, in which a horizontal element supports and flattens the garments so as to make their graphic designs as legible as possible – thus rendering explicit and intelligible the passage from pattern design to the actual production of clothing (Fig. 12) – in Paris the garments are

consistently presented on mannequins to demonstrate their real and everyday use. In the final gallery of the exhibition, they are articulated autonomously in the form of a veritable runway, surrounded by seating for visitors and accompanied by immersive atmospheres and digital projections of fashion shows (Fig. 13).

Fig. 10: *Manga. Tout un art! De la tradition japonaise à la pop culture* at the Musée Guimet in Paris. Photo of the authors.

Fig. 11: *Graphic Japan: From Hokusai to Manga* at the Museo Civico Archeologico in Bologna. Photo of the authors.



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Narrative Strategies and Mediation through the Prism of Fashion³²

In Western exhibitions devoted to Japanese culture, museum storytelling³³ plays a decisive role in mediating a historically stratified visual tradition for audiences whose familiarity with its references and conventions is uneven. Narrative structures and mediation devices thus function as interpretive frameworks capable of articulating relationships among images, techniques, and systems of meaning that are historically and culturally distant from the viewers' own visual experience.

It is within this perspective that the exhibitions *Manga. Tout un art!* and *Graphic Japan* can be situated, as both projects engage with questions of continuity and transformation in Japanese graphic culture in relation to contemporary visual production, while adopting distinct narrative strategies. Within these exhibition

itineraries, fashion assumes a specific analytical role as a domain in which the graphic sign moves beyond the two-dimensional image to articulate itself through objects and bodies. This shift renders visible the passage between project and form, offering an effective interpretive lens for examining the dynamics of circulation, appropriation, and reformulation of the Japanese visual imaginary within the European museum context.

Such an approach resonates with critical reflections that have highlighted the capacity of certain visual languages to enter the public sphere without relinquishing complexity. As observed by Ingrid Sischy and Germano Celant, the overcoming of traditional oppositions between autonomous art and applied production, high and low culture, the unique and the serial does not result in a loss of symbolic density, but rather in a transformation of regimes of visibility and modes of public access.³⁴ From this perspec-

Fig. 12:
Graphic Japan: From Hokusai to Manga at the Museo Civico Archeologico in Bologna. Photo of the authors.



Fig. 13:
Manga. Tout un art! De la tradition japonaise à la pop culture at the Musée Guimet in Paris. Photo of the authors.

tive, fashion may be understood as a system of abstract signs characterized by acceleration, proliferation, and the continuous renegotiation of meaning, which foregrounds the need for mediation practices capable of operating beyond the immediately visible surface. This shift is made explicit by the decision of Sischy and Celant to feature a photograph of a creation by Issey Miyake on the cover of the American journal *Artforum* in 1982, an editorial choice that positioned fashion within the visual and symbolic economy of contemporary art and recognized it as an artistic language rather than as a purely applied or commercial practice. The work of Issey Miyake clarifies how the garment can function as a mnemonic and projectual device grounded in transformation and in the reactivation of historical models,³⁵ and how, through pleating, modularity, and the dialogue between natural and artificial processes, clothing becomes a space of negotiation between past and present, East and West, operating effectively across both critical discourse and exhibition-based narratives devoted to Japanese culture.

This line of interpretation finds further support in critical approaches that frame fashion as a liminal field and as a space of epistemic tension capable of destabilizing established artistic categories.³⁶ When integrated into exhibition storytelling, fashion thus emerges as a privileged analytical tool for examining the processes of “artification”³⁷ and institutionalization through which Japanese graphic culture is translated, recontextualized, and renegotiated within the European museum space.

On a more strictly museological level, exhibitions of Japanese fashion in Western contexts have played an active role in processes of cultural legitimation, often operating beyond the boundaries of the national framework.³⁸ In these contexts, clothing functions as a form of cultural mediation, capable of traversing geographical, institutional, and symbolic spheres. The musealization of an object conceived for the body and for use introduces structural tensions that require careful curatorial negotiation, particularly with regard to the restitution of its processual and performative dimensions. Such tensions foreground the importance of narrative strategies and visual comparison in articulating dress not as a static artifact, but as a practice situated at the intersection of image, movement, and social use.³⁹

From a complementary perspective, exhibition display may be understood as a discursive act through which meaning is produced by selection, juxtaposition, and spatial sequencing.⁴⁰ Within exhibitions devoted to Japanese visual culture, fashion proves especially effective in establishing relationships among images, illustrated books, and garments, thereby rendering historical continuities and formal affinities legible. Meaning does not reside exclusively in the objects themselves but emerges from their arrangement and from the visual itinerary constructed for the visitor, who is conceived as an active participant in the process of signification rather than as a passive recipient of information.⁴¹

The exhibition *Manga. Tout un art!* proposes a long-term narrative

aimed at reconstructing the genealogy of manga within the Japanese graphic tradition, positioning it at the intersection of historical production, popular culture, and the global cultural industry. Its narrative framework privileges a broad chronological progression, articulated through thematic clusters that make it possible to relate works, techniques, and imaginaries from different periods and contexts, without resorting to a rigidly disciplinary subdivision.

The first section is devoted to the historical antecedents of manga, in which *ukiyo-e* prints, illustrated books, and premodern iconographic repertoires are presented as visual matrices of a serial and disseminative image culture. Here, the graphic dimension is already placed in dialogue with material and sartorial culture. Alongside printed images, elements of historical dress, including samurai garments and accessories (Fig. 14-15), situate graphic production within a broader visual economy that extends to the body and to socially codified forms of representation. The storytelling thus foregrounds the construction of figurative models intended for wide circulation, emphasizing continuity across artistic practices, publishing, and material culture, not through linear genealogy but through the persistence of narrative structures, compositional strategies, and modes of image reception.

The exhibition goes on to frame modern manga as an autonomous narrative language that is nonetheless structurally open to transmedial circulation.⁴² Rather than offering a purely historical account, the display foregrounds the editorial,



generic, and authorial conditions through which manga emerged as a mass cultural system capable of producing shared imaginaries and codified visual regimes beyond the printed page. It is within this framework that fashion enters the exhibition, not as ornament or citation, but as a critical site of translation in which the graphic sign is rearticulated through the body and the object (Fig. 16). By tracing the passage of manga aesthetics into garments and design, the exhibition makes visible manga's capacity to traverse media, cultural practices, and economic circuits. The final section consolidates

Fig. 14: *Manga. Tout un art! De la tradition japonaise à la pop culture* at the Musée Guimet in Paris. Photo of the authors.



Fig. 15: *Manga. Tout un art! De la tradition japonaise à la pop culture* at the Musée Guimet in Paris. Photo of the authors.

this argument by situating manga within a broader network of fashion, design, and contemporary pop culture (Fig. 17), where collaborations with luxury and haute couture render explicit its transformation from an editorial language into a global symbolic resource.

From the perspective of audience engagement, the exhibition adopts an inclusive strategy aimed at addressing visitors with differing levels of expertise and familiarity. The alternation of historical works and contemporary materials, together with the use of mediation devic-

es, constructs a visitor experience grounded in recognition and visual continuity rather than in specialist depth. This approach is made explicit in the room dedicated to Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, where the original print is displayed alongside works by contemporary comic artists and a haute couture dress by Dior inspired by the iconic image, a curatorial gesture that foregrounds processes of citation, influence, and recontextualization across time and media (Fig. 18). In this framework, *Manga. Tout un art!* articulates a model of museum storytelling in which manga, also through the integration of fashion, functions as a key device for examining the circulation and cultural legitimation of Japanese graphic production within the contemporary European context.

Similarly, the exhibition *Graphic Japan* proposes an interpretation of Japanese graphic tradition grounded in a thematic and process-oriented narrative that privileges relationships among images, techniques, and supports over linear chronology. The itinerary unfolds through conceptual clusters spanning the full historical arc of graphic production, foregrounding structural continuities and formal recurrences rather than stylistic ruptures or author-centered genealogies.⁴³

Graphic production is therefore presented as an integrated cultural system operating across the image, the object, and social use. Prints, illustrated books, matrices, and textiles are arranged to make visible processes of transfer and transformation of the sign across different supports, emphasizing the historical permeability between fine arts,



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Fig. 16:
Manga. Tout un art! De la tradition japonaise à la pop culture at the Musée Guimet in Paris. Photo of the authors.

Fig. 17:
Manga. Tout un art! De la tradition japonaise à la pop culture at the Musée Guimet in Paris. Photo of the authors.



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craftsmanship, and applied practices⁴⁴ (Fig. 19). Rather than tracing a progressive evolution toward manga, the storytelling highlights enduring visual logics such as seriality, modulation of the sign, and the relationship between figure and surface.

In this context, fashion and dress occupy a central, transversal position. Kimonos, decorated textiles, and production matrices are presented as key elements for observing continuity between design, decoration, and use, underscoring the systemic character of Japanese visual culture. A particularly significant role is played by *katagami*, which makes explicit the passage from drawing to textile decoration, allowing viewers to visualize a project culture founded on reproducibility and variation. Through these devices, the exhibition renders legible the structural relationship between graphic design and fashion, highlighting how seriality and modulation of the sign

precede by centuries the Western distinction between fine and applied arts.

Reflection on the body and on the representation of identity reaches a point of particular intensity in the woodblock prints by Tōshūsai Sharaku,⁴⁵ in which clothing contributes decisively to the construction of figurative typologies. In actor portraits, kimonos, hairstyles, and accessories actively participate in the definition of roles, postures, and expressive tensions, making dress an essential narrative element of the image. In this sense, fashion emerges as a codified language, fully integrated into the graphic system and into the construction of meaning (Fig. 20). In the same exhibition section, the creations of Issey Miyake function as nodes of connection between tradition and contemporaneity.⁴⁶ Their placement does not follow the logic of spectacular contrast, but rather a narrative strategy that invites visitors to recognize structural affin-

Fig. 18:
Manga. Tout un art! De la tradition japonaise à la pop culture at the Musée Guimet in Paris. Photo of the authors.



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Fig. 19:
*Graphic Japan:
From Hokusai
to Manga* at the
Museo Civico
Archeologico in
Bologna. Photo of
the authors.

Fig. 20:
*Graphic Japan:
From Hokusai
to Manga* at the
Museo Civico
Archeologico in
Bologna. Photo of
the authors.

Fig. 21:
*Graphic Japan:
From Hokusai
to Manga* at the
Museo Civico
Archeologico in
Bologna. Photo of
the authors.

ities between historical practices and recent design research.

From the perspective of museum storytelling, the analysis of the two exhibitions highlights how, within the recent European museum landscape, Japanese graphic culture is addressed as a complex cultural system shaped by historical continuities, technical transformations, and processes of global image circulation. In both cases, storytelling plays a central role in rendering this complexity intelligible, organizing heterogeneous materials and diverse audiences within coherent narrative frameworks. Within this context, fashion emerges as a shared language, albeit one that performs markedly different functions in the two projects.

In the Bologna exhibition, fashion does not operate as a device of trans-medial recognition, but instead assumes a predominantly comparative and cognitive role. Embedded within a thematic and process-oriented narrative, kimonos, textiles, and matrices function as tools of technical intelligibility, making visible the passage from drawing to surface, from project to object, and from image to body (Fig. 21). Rather than activating a shared pop imaginary, clothing contributes to clarifying the deep structures of Japanese graphic tradition, emphasizing its historical continuity and systemic dimension. Within this framework, the integration of images, matrices, garments, and objects enables the legibility of processes of graphic production and transfer (Figs. 22-23), positioning fashion less as a thematic focus than as an analytical tool for reading the interrelation of image, body, and social use.

In the Paris exhibition, instead, fashion operates as a device of recognition and transmediality, capable of immediately activating the audience's imaginary and situating manga within a global visual ecosystem. Through clothing, the manga graphic sign acquires a performative articulation that highlights its capacity to traverse media, supports, and production spheres, from publishing to the fashion industry. This is perhaps most vividly seen in the phenomenon of cosplay,⁴⁷ where fans embody manga characters through costume and performance, further extending manga's influence into everyday life and global popular culture. From fan practices to high fashion, these logics persist: the collaborations between luxury maisons and manga authors docu-

mented in the exhibition catalogue illustrate how, since the early 2000s, manga aesthetics have assumed the status of a true transmedial cultural language.⁴⁸ In these cases, fashion does not simply reference a pre-existing imaginary, but adopts manga's narrative codes, translating seriality, character construction, and chromatic intensity into sartorial forms conceived to activate storytelling and extend manga's field of action beyond the editorial medium.

In both contexts, the exhibition space emerges as a site for the critical organization of the global circulation of images (Fig. 24). Through narrative choices, display strategies, and mediation devices, the museum intervenes in shaping processes of cultural translation that bring graphic tradition, popular production, and contemporary reinterpretation into dialogue. It is precisely in the capacity to articulate differences between performativity and process, recognition and comparison, that one of the central challenges of museum storytelling devoted to Japanese graphic culture in Europe is negotiated today.



22

Conclusions

The exhibitions *Manga. Tout un art!* and *Graphic Japan* present themselves as parallel and, in many respects, complementary responses to key challenges currently shaping museum practice devoted to Japanese visual culture in Europe. Conceived to address broad and intergenerational audiences, both projects deploy forms of display and mediation capable of engaging non-specialist visitors – particularly younger generations – without

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Fig. 22:
*Graphic Japan:
From Hokusai
to Manga* at the
Museo Civico
Archeologico in
Bologna. Photo of
the authors.

Fig. 23:
*Graphic Japan:
From Hokusai
to Manga* at the
Museo Civico
Archeologico in
Bologna. Photo of
the authors.

Fig. 24:
*Graphic Japan:
From Hokusai
to Manga* at the
Museo Civico
Archeologico in
Bologna. Photo of
the authors.

resorting to a simplification of content. Instead, audience accessibility becomes the occasion for a strategic reconfiguration of exhibition narratives.

Together, the two exhibitions testify both to the persistence of a long-standing European fascination with Japan and to the cultural and economic centrality acquired by contemporary forms of graphic and popular visual production. Within this framework, manga emerges as an emblematic site of tension between artistic legitimacy and mass entertainment, occupying an intermediate position that museums are increasingly called upon to interrogate rather than resolve.

The comparison between the two projects highlights divergent curatorial strategies for addressing this ambiguity. In Paris, manga is framed as a global and transmedial language, immediately mobilizing the public imaginary and entering into dialogue with fashion, design, publishing, and the luxury industry. In

Bologna, Japanese graphic culture is approached as a *longue durée* visual system, in which images, matrices, textiles, and garments reveal processes of continuity, transfer, and transformation across media and historical contexts. In both cases, exhibition architecture and museum storytelling play a decisive role in orienting the visitor's gaze and in making curatorial choices legible.

This plurality of perspectives is coherently extended in the respective catalogues, which function not merely as documentation but as critical spaces in their own right. Through the interplay of architecture, narrative, and mediation, the two exhibitions ultimately demonstrate how Japanese graphic culture can be addressed today as a complex and dynamic field in which tradition and contemporaneity, art and entertainment, visual culture and global consumption do not cancel each other out, but are mutually constitutive and productively interrogated within the museum space.

Endnotes:

- 1 Opened from 19 November 2025 to 9 March 2026, the exhibition was curated by Estelle Bauer, curator of the Japanese collections at the Musée Guimet, and by journalist Didier Pasamonik.
- 2 Opened from 20 November 2025 to 6 April 2026, the exhibition was organized by MondoMostre and curated by Rossella Menegazzo and Eleonora Lanza.
- 3 From the 1860s onward, following the opening of treaty ports, increasing numbers of foreign nationals settled in Japan for commercial and diplomatic purposes. Port cities such as Yokohama, Kobe, Hakodate, and Nagasaki developed rapidly into hybrid environments where Japanese customs and Western practices coexisted and influenced one another. In order to study Western institutions and industrial techniques firsthand, the Japanese government organized the Iwakura Mission in 1871, led by Foreign Minister Tomomi Iwakura. Comprising officials, technicians, translators, and students tasked with learning European production methods and collecting manufactured goods, the delegation also visited the Vienna World Exhibition in 1873, where Japan participated for the first time as an official exhibitor with a national pavilion. See Lanza 2025, pp. 17-18.
- 4 See Mears 2008.
- 5 The author of this section is Federico Maria Giorgi, PhD candidate at the DABC Department of the Politecnico di Milano and at the EVCAU Laboratory of Université Paris Cité.
- 6 In addition to the experiences discussed above, mention should also be made of the exhibition *À portée d'Asie*, held at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon from 20 October 2023 to 5 February 2024, where an immersive scenographic design inspired by the traditional colors of lacquerware objects was developed.
- 7 From 20 October 2017 to 5 March 2018.
- 8 The exhibition scenography was developed in collaboration with SANAA and is particularly reminiscent of the subsequent work carried out for the Galerie du Temps at the Louvre-Lens in 2024.
- 9 AtoY studio website, *Japonorama*, <https://atelier-atoy.com/japonorama/> (accessed 26 December 2025).
- 10 From 9 November 2022 to 21 January 2023.
- 11 From 15 November 2018 to 3 March 2019.
- 12 Some spaces on the second floor can host “micro-exhibitions” that are complementary to, or independent from, the larger exhibitions held on the underground level. This is a particularly relevant aspect in the case of *Manga. Tout un art!*, as the section *Avant les mangas* closed on 26 January 2026, more than one month before the rest of the exhibition.
- 13 See the article on light design published in the *Architecture and Displays* section of the third issue of *MMD*: Giorgi 2025, pp. 229–248.
- 14 Musée national des arts asiatiques – Guimet, from 16 March 2022 to 29 August 2022.
- 15 It is important to note in this context that *Power Rangers* represent one of the most well-known examples of the Western adaptation of an East Asian television program, as the series reused combat scenes from *Super Sentai*, re-editing and intercutting them with newly filmed sequences featuring American actors.
- 16 Paolo Capponcelli is also the author of the volume *Mille disegni dal vero. Architetture, luoghi, personaggi. Carnets 1980–2023*, 2024.
- 17 For a more comprehensive understanding of Panstudio’s design and museographic activity, reference should be made to commissions for the Vatican Museums, including the exhibitions of the Vatican Treasures in the United States, Mexico, and the Philippines

during apostolic visits; for the Regional Province of Palermo (Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea at Palazzo Sant'Elia); for the Venice Biennale (exhibition design for the 2001 Venice Film Festival); and for the Borromeo Islands Administration (Doll Museum at the Rocca di Angera). For municipal administrations, Panstudio has realized the "Giorgio Morandi" Documentation Center in Grizzana, the Civic Museums of Rimini, the Santarcangelo Archaeological History Museum, the Museo del Tricolore in Reggio Emilia, the Barletta Museum Hub, and the reinstallation of the Modern and Contemporary Mosaics section of the MAR in Ravenna. Panstudio has also overseen the creation of the Archaeological Park of Ebla and the renovation and new installation of the Idlib Museum in Syria.

18 Palazzo Albergati, Bologna, from 24 March to 9 September 2018.

19 Two figures to whom a dedicated section is also devoted in the current exhibition *Graphic Japan*.

20 The exhibition was conceived as a continuation of the initiatives launched in 2016 to mark the 150th anniversary of bilateral relations between Italy and Japan, a milestone that also saw the Municipality of Bologna involved in other cultural projects, including exhibitions devoted to Giorgio Morandi in Kobe, Tokyo, and Iwate. MondoMostre–Skira, for its part, has curated exhibitions dedicated to Hokusai, Hiroshige, and Utamaro at Palazzo Reale in Milan; *Hokusai* at the Ara Pacis in Rome; *Masterpieces of Japanese Buddhist Sculpture* at the Scuderie del Quirinale in Rome; and *Kuniyoshi. Visionary of the Floating World* at the Museo della Permanente in Milan.

21 Challenges with which Panstudio is well acquainted, particularly through the experience gained with the exhibition *I pittori di Pompei*, also realized in collaboration with MondoMostre from 23 September 2022 to 19 March 2023. That exhibition was characterized not only by the constraints imposed by the exhibition space, but also by the need to address significant issues related to the considerable weight and large dimensions of the Pompeian frescoes on display.

22 A clear example of this strategy is the transparent display element used in the first gallery to house a kimono. The case allows visitors to view both the front and the back of the garment, while also enabling sightlines on either side toward the graphic elements that inspired its decorative motifs, as well as toward the cut paper stencils used to create patterns during the dyeing of textiles.

23 Stemming from this insight, which originated during a visit to one of the Japanese designer's stores while traveling in New York, the exhibition includes not only several kimonos inspired by traditional Japanese graphic design, but also a selection of graphic works created for the brand's *Pleats Please* advertising campaigns.

24 An emblematic example of this approach is the diagonal wall installed in the gallery entirely devoted to the theme of Mount Fuji. Through a single diagonal element, the visitor's route is rendered immediately clear, first along one side of the panel and then along the other.

25 This careful attention to the use of materials was also extended to the creation of the educational room, requested by the commissioning body toward the end of the design process, for which leftover carpet offcuts from the exhibition were reused to create a floor with an abstract geometric pattern.

26 Marquet 2025, p.10.

27 In his hanging scroll paintings, and above all through his polychrome woodblock prints, the artist was able to interpret the world in which he lived in a new way, employing free and rapid lines and a masterful use of color, particularly Prussian blue, which had only recently been imported into Japan, drawing inspiration both from indigenous pictorial traditions and from techniques derived from Western art.

28 Pasamonik 2025, pp. 62-65.

29 For an initial critical bibliography, see the exhibition catalogue *Manga. Tout un*

art! 2025, pp. 203–207.

30 The historical dimension, drawing on outstanding works from the Musée Guimet collections, was organized in a separate space on the first floor with its own exhibition schedule.

31 The exhibition continues the exploration of relations between Italy and Japan developed in the context of Expo Osaka 2025.

32 The author of this section is Alessandro Paolo Lena, PhD in Visual, Performing and Media Arts from the University of Bologna and in Art History from Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.

33 For critical reflections on storytelling in museums, see Gottschall 2014; Bodo, Mascheroni, and Panigada 2016; Cataldo 2017; Dal Maso 2018; De Bideran and Bourdaa 2021; Costa, Cordera, Poulot 2022.

34 Sischy, Celant 1982, p. 34.

35 Sischy, Celant 1982, p. 35.

36 On fashion as a liminal field in the artworld, see in particular Hammen, Rousseau 2024a. On the display of fashion as art, see Petrov 2019, pp. 91-112.

37 Hammen, Rousseau 2024b, p. 12. The authors ground their analysis in Roberta Shapiro's definition of *artification* as “le processus de transformation du non-art en art, résultat d'un travail complexe qui engendre un changement de définition et de statut des personnes, des objets, et des activités.” Shapiro 2012, p. 20.

38 Mears 2008, pp. 96-99.

39 Mears 2008, pp. 108-113.

40 On exhibition of textiles as a discursive construction, see Petrov 2019, pp. 6-8.

41 For a deeper analysis of these themes, see Petrov 2019, pp. 100-105, 137-145, 184-186.

42 On transmedia storytelling, see in particular De Bideran, Bourdaa 2021; Scolari 2025.

43 The exhibition itinerary is mirrored in the accompanying catalogue which follows the same sectional structure. See *Graphic Japan* 2025.

44 In the catalogue of the exhibition, Eleonora Lanza explains that: “i disegnatori di questi nuovi modelli erano illustratori-designer (*zuanka*), ideatori dei disegni (*zuan*) destinati a un'ampia gamma di applicazioni: dai modelli per kimono di lusso ai motivi decorativi per ceramiche, ventagli, lacche e suppellettili, dalle cartoline ai manifesti. Il concetto di un artista che lavorasse esclusivamente per creare disegni era una novità per i giapponesi, poiché, fino ad allora, spesso era lo stesso artigiano che creava e applicava un disegno su tessuto. La parola tradizionale giapponese per disegno era *moyo* (motivo), mentre i termini *zuan* e poi *dessin* (dal francese) furono due nuove parole aggiunte alla lingua giapponese nel periodo Meiji che porta vano con sé le sfumature di ‘nuovo’, ‘moderno’, ‘esotico’”; Lanza 2025, p. 18.

45 *Graphic Japan* 2025, pp. 194-195.

46 *Graphic Japan* 2025, p. 193.

47 See Pinon 2025.

48 Samuel, Bléchet 2025, pp. 194-196. Aurélie Samuel and Alix Bléchet trace the intensification of manga aesthetics within luxury fashion from the early 2000s onward, describing the emergence of what they term a “mangagenic” approach to clothing. They highlight a series of emblematic collaborations, including Prada's costumes for *Appleseed Ex Machina* (2007), Gucci's 2013 Cruise collection developed with Araki Hirohiko, accompanied by the narrative *Jolyne, Fly High with Gucci*, as well as later partnerships with Oda Eiichirō and the creation of a Doraemon capsule collection. The authors note a

marked increase since 2020 in collaborations between major fashion houses and manga licenses, underscoring manga's transition into a key symbolic and narrative resource for the luxury sector.

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