

The Tortoise in the Temple: Orientalism, Japonisme, and the Exploitation of Asian Turtle Mystique in Western Popular Imagination

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TO PUT ON A PEDESTAL

In the winter of 1916, the predominantly male readers of the Standard Oil Company of California's shareholder magazine, *Standard Oil Bulletin*, may have been surprised to find a somewhat unusual cover illustration and feature article in the December issue. Under the headline "Our Garden of Girls" with a cover to match, this issue was dedicated to the "Lunch Room... precincts set apart for the exclusive use of the women of the home-office force" on the roof of the Standard Oil Building in San Francisco, California. Flipping through this dated article replete with not-so-veiled allusions to the fairer sex ("the daisy and the rose," "the modest violet and the forget-me-not") in a sea of otherwise industry-standard briefs concerning asphaltum and crude oil prices, readers would have concluded their session with a glance at the back cover where an equally unusual advertisement for Zerolene Motor Oil awaited them.

There on the back cover stand three tortoises (Fig. 1). And stand they do—each upon a well lit square stone tablet raised above the ground on its own stone pillar. The room in which they are displayed is dark and brooding but otherwise nondescript, were it not for what appears to be a bonsai tree in a square pot. The pot, set upon a table off to one side almost like an afterthought, is inscribed with indistinct characters that appear at first glance to be Asian. The walls—faint but visible in the background—boast strong horizontal and vertical elements resembling the posts and beam timber lattice and paper paneling suggestive of traditional Asian architecture (Wichmann 2001). But any uncertainty regarding where this curious scene takes place is resolved in the accompanying ad copy for Zerolene Motor Oil which reads in part:

DEMONSTRATING LUBRICATION

IN A TEMPLE in Japan a number of tortoises placed on stone tablets go through walking movements without effecting change of location. The tablets have been greased and the slippery surfaces do not afford the friction-hold necessary to locomotion. Though this trick, first played on the tortoises centuries ago, thwarted travel instead of aiding it, it demonstrates the theory of lubrication—the elimination of friction.

Zerolene Motor Oil was the Standard Oil Company's motor oil brand, so named because it flowed freely at zero degrees (Standard Oil 1915). But the product being advertised isn't half as intriguing as the experience—the mystique—this advertisement was trying to monetize.

At least, that might be the case if there were any truth to this apocryphal tale of tortoises and temples, to which there's not. Because there were no such greased tortoises. And no such temple. The entire scene is a work of fiction, the fabrication of a good old-fashioned Madison Avenue ad-man.

THE AD-MAN COMETH

For 35 years, the *Standard Oil Bulletin* was published monthly by the Standard Oil Company of California (which later became Chevron in 1984) and distributed to its stockholders between 1913 and 1948. The periodical was published by the Standard Oil Company's ad agency, H.K. McCann Co. (later, McCann Erickson; today known as McCann), and contained articles about oil production, oil prices, services, and human interest stories on the West Coast (California, Oregon, and Washington). Each issue featured lavishly illustrated covers by West Coast artists who were breaking new ground in the "California Style" (Chevron Corp. 2007), such as (Lafayette) Maynard Dixon (1875–1946), Maurice George Logan (1886–1977), Harold Von Schmidt (1893–1982), Waldo Edmund Bemis (1891–1951), W. R. (Wesley Raymond) de Lappe (1887–1952), Carl Jacob Neher (1901–1970), and J. L. (Judson Lewis) Starr (1890–1960) (Hughes 1986).

The bulletin's cover art varied in subject matter, sometimes featuring their operations (e.g. oil fields), other times the breathtaking vistas of the West Coast. But no matter the vista, most of the covers managed to incorporate automobiles, ship liners, heavy equipment, or—at the very least—roadways, to keep in theme with the industry push to promote "the automobile's increased popularity and the mobile society that it created" (Chevron Corp. 2007). Predictably, many of *Standard Oil Bulletin* artists' work also graced the billboards that lined California's expanding roadway system at that time (Chevron Corp. 2007). On occasion, an unadulterated natural scene would slip in among the otherwise product placement-heavy magazine covers, such as the

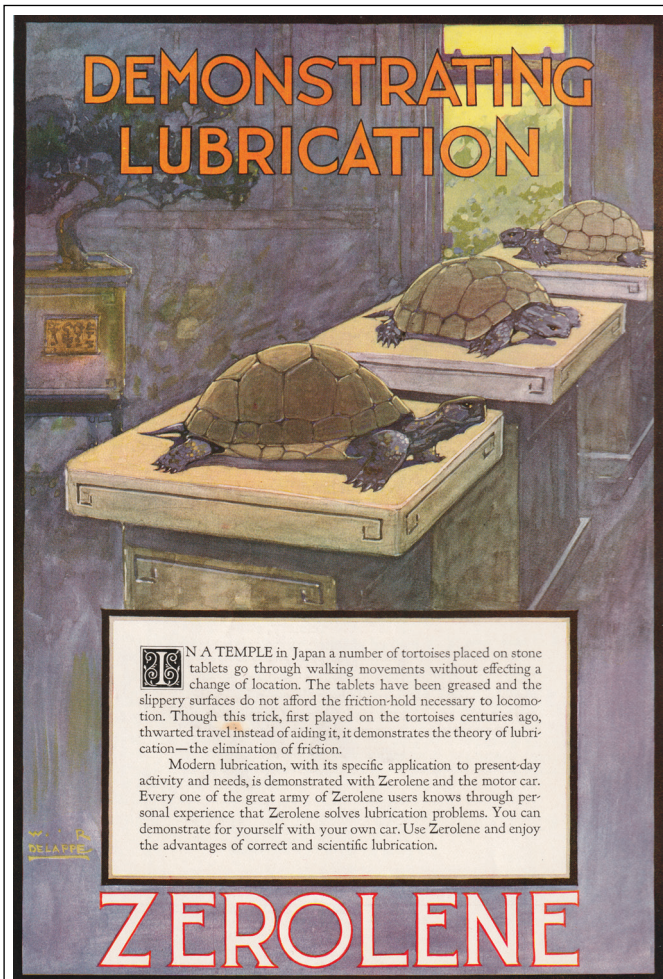


Fig. 1. The back cover of the December 1916 issue of the Standard Oil Company of California’s shareholder magazine, *Standard Oil Bulletin*, featured this advertisement for Zerolene Motor Oil. The ad copy that accompanied this illustration describing tortoises placed atop greased pedestals in a Japanese temple appears to apocryphal, made up by an ad-man to monetize the mystique of Japan—a practice known today as *Japonisme*.

Desert Tortoise (*Gopherus* sp.) that adorned the April 1931 issue of *Standard Oil Bulletin* (Fig. 2). The editors and ad-men at Standard Oil Bulletin and McCann knew all too well that there was an “attention value” that came with depicting animals—like Zerolene’s iconic polar bear (or tortoises)—in advertising (Standard Oil 1915).

H.K. McCann Co. founder Harrison King McCann himself commissioned the cover assignments from his “rich talent pool of illustrators”:

With their unique convergence of social philosophies, artistic ideals, progressive attitudes and the ferment of the times, the artists were in the vanguard of what became known as the “California Style.” Many narrowed traditional distinctions between fine and commercial art and managed to achieve recognition for both. Most of the illustrators represented one or more distinctive schools of art — such as Fauvism, “plein air”



Fig. 2. Although it was rare, wildlife were occasionally featured on the front cover of the *Standard Oil Bulletin*; the cover of the April 1931 issue, for example, featured a Desert Tortoise (*Gopherus* sp.) by famed American artist Maynard Dixon.

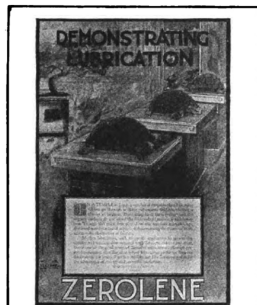
(literally, “open air” or *alfresco*) and Modernism—that gave an intellectual underpinning to their work (Chevron Corp. 2007).

W.R. de Lappe—the illustrator behind the Japanese tortoise Zerolene ad—was a fixture in McCann’s stable of illustrators, working as a freelance artist under contract to McCann for approximately 50 years (Hughes 1986). The arts ran strong in de Lappe’s social circle. After a brief marriage to de Lappe’s then art student and future Hollywood screenwriter Marion Frances (born Marion Benson Owens), he later remarried and had a daughter, Phyllis “Pele” de Lappe, with his second wife Dorothy Sheldon. Pele would later befriend Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, join the Communist party, become a political cartoonist and rights activist and, eventually, an artist known for her social realism artwork (Hughes 1986, Beauchamp 1997, Scherr 2007).

Working for McCann, de Lappe’s subjects varied. Sprinkled among de Lappe’s numerous *Standard Oil Bulletin* covers are a front-to-back cover panorama of the California oil

Ad-Letter Contest Awards for April

As the contest goes on, the interest among SUNSET's readers in the advertising announcements shows a steady growth, and the judges had found it quite difficult to handle the flood of letters received this month. These letters come from all parts of the country and all reveal a real knowledge of advertising. The writers have found that this contest is more than fun—that it has an educational value that stimulates an appreciation of the great work the national advertisers and advertising writers are doing. Below are the prize winners for April as the judges have decreed. They have made fair and impartial awards and if you have not written your letter as yet, these winners may give you some valuable suggestions.



First Prize—Zerolene

Curiosity, one of the most powerful and ever present instincts! Just to the degree that the advertiser plays upon it does he secure and hold the reader's attention. But the arousal of curiosity in advertising takes place through the eye. What better than than color to attract and mystery and newness to hold?

Three great tortoises, in sharp relief against a non-attention holding background, with the two words, clear cut and distinct above, "Demonstrating Lubrication." The reader's eye is instantly caught; his curiosity immediately aroused. He has seen the big word Zerolene at the foot of the page and probably knows what it is, but he does not get on to another page and instantly dismiss Zerolene from his mind. His curiosity about the tortoises is still alive and if it nearly died at seeing the familiar word Zerolene it is instantly revived by the first thing he reads, "In a Temple in Japan." Here is mystery and newness again and he reads on, Zerolene still in his mind.

And now the relevancy of the curiosity instilled and the Zerolene must be shown, the point of the advertisement made and the whole thing done with while the interest is still alive. In the two short concise paragraphs of the advertisement all this is accomplished and in addition the word Zerolene is used by the reader four times just as he finishes reading. Zerolene is bound to be impressed indelibly upon his mind. It is truly a wonderful advertisement.

S. FORSYTHE BARKER
1022 Hope Building, Seattle, Washington.



Second Prize—American Telephone

The American Telephone and Telegraph ad in April SUNSET is an excellent example of the indirect or educational method in modern publicity work. The primary purpose of this ad is to mould public opinion; its appeal is predicated on the broad, high ground of better living conditions for the nation's rural people; it seeks to spread the gospel of the telephone as an instrument of social and economic progress, to educate the farmer, to minimize the inconvenience and isolation of rural life by urging a more general use of the telephone. The black, wintry scene at the top of the ad flashes an accurate visualization of the "shut-in" condition of farm life in the North during the long winter months.

The accompanying text seductively suggests that the farmer with a telephone "need not stir from the cheerful hearth beside in the winter, nor grope along dark roads for friendly news or aid in time of trouble."

The telephone is "the farmer's key to the outside world." The conclusion is plain—that the telephone, as a civilizing influence, had done and is doing more to alleviate the natural isolation of rural life than any other agency, not even excepting the rural free mail delivery. Throughout, the ad is broadly educational in its tone. Somewhat incidentally we are told that the Bell System is serving 2,525,000 farmers; it extends throughout the length and breadth of the land; it has "One Policy—One System—Universal Service." This is advertising in highest form.

MARY KURIN
4718 Ellis Ave., Chicago, Ill.



Third Prize—Grape Nuts

"Food Fit for a King!" means Grape Nuts pre-eminent among the breakfast foods and the beautiful and delicate blending of colors makes the ad pleasing to look at and appetizing to the appetite in its luscious loveliness.

The glow of health, the expressions of content on the faces of the young crowd, "Ancestors of the Breakfast Table" as well as of the mother are convincing to the skeptic that Grape Nuts are healthful as well as palatable.

Green and Fruited! Ye gods! and Grape Nuts, too! Not only "food that's fit for a king" but it's good enough for plain democratic Americans with nerve a hankering for kingly food!

Conservation marks the ad, too, since it says just enough and tells its story clearly, concisely, convincingly and the yellow box is the sequel with "Fit" understood.

The picture on the wall blends past and present, harking back to colonial days—just a step down from kingly; the music, easy suggests happiness and health; the greenery in the window and the dainty curtains harmonize with the fruits on the table and the winsome brightness of the happy faces make Grape Nuts the index of the story.

Cool business acumen and an aesthetic temperament have made the ad a twelve cylinder success; it's no flivver.

BENJAMIN MORTON INGRAM,
Boston, Texas.

AWARDS OF MERIT—In addition to the particularly good prize winning letters reproduced above, the letter of C. H. Vashburgh, Warren, New York, on the advertisement of the Bauer & Black "Blue Jay Corn Flakes," and the letter of Mrs. Gay Bancroft, East Calais, Vermont, on the advertisement of Edward V. Hartford, Inc., Shook Absorbents have been found worthy of special mention and a cash award of five dollars each. Many other extremely good letters were received, analyzing the advertisements of Eastman Kodak, Indian Motorcycle, the Victor Talking Machine Co., the Postal Life Insurance Co., Glenwood Range, Savage Tires, Johnston Candies, Schilling's Auto Camp, and a number of others, but it was impossible to make the five prize take care of them all.

FIVE CASH PRIZES EACH MONTH FOR MERELY WRITING LETTERS

The object of this Contest is to stimulate the interest of SUNSET Magazine readers in the splendid announcements of the national advertisers whose advertisements appear each month in the Magazine, and to encourage a keener appreciation of the values of design and text.

What constitutes a good advertisement? Why do some ads appeal more strongly to you than do others? Why did this or that announcement indelibly impress itself upon your memory?

Study the ads in this number of SUNSET. Try to analyze the advertisement that made the deepest impression upon your mind. Then write down your reasons. Simple, isn't it? Now! For the best letter received each month we will award a cash prize of \$25.00; for the second best letter, a prize of \$15.00; for the third, a prize of \$10.00. Each of these letters will be published in full in SUNSET Magazine, together with a reproduction of the ad, and the name and address of the prize-winning letter writer. In addition to these cash prizes, there will be two \$5.00 cash prizes as awards of merit for the fourth and fifth best letters.

Above are the prize-winning letters in the April Contest. They are good letters, carefully written and carefully analyzed. They are good letters, carefully written and carefully analyzed. They are good letters, carefully written and carefully analyzed. They are good letters, carefully written and carefully analyzed.

RULES GOVERNING THE AD-LETTER CONTEST

If you can write a letter, you stand a chance to obtain one of these cash prizes.

The conditions of the Contest are all set forth in this announcement. It will not be necessary to write for further particulars. Just send in your letters, typewritten if possible, together with your name and address.

The contest begins with the January, 1916, issue and will run until July, 1917.

The letter must not exceed 350 words in length.

The letter must bear the name and address of the writer and in no instance will we assume responsibility for the return of manuscript.

The letter must be submitted within ten days after receipt of copy by the subscriber in order to reach us in time for consideration. The announcement of the prize will follow in the second month's number of SUNSET—for example, the prize-winning letters submitted on the advertisements in the June SUNSET must reach us not later than June 10th and the awards will be announced in the August issue of SUNSET.

Send Your Subscription and Address all Correspondence to Contest Editor, Sunset Magazine, San Francisco

winner of the magazine's monthly "Ad-Letter Contest" (Sunset 1917b) (Fig. 3). The contest, based on write-in submissions from *Sunset's* readers, was inspired "to stimulate the interest of SUNSET Magazine readers in the splendid announcements of the national advertisers whose advertisements appear each month in the Magazine, and to encourage a keener appreciation of the values of design and text" (Sunset 1917b). The first prize winning letter, which garnered reader Mr. S. Forsythe Barker of Seattle, Washington a \$25 cash prize, reads:

Curiosity; one of the most powerful and ever present instincts! Just to the degree that the advertiser plays upon it does he secure and hold the reader's attention. But the arousal of curiosity in advertising takes place through the eye. What better than color to attract and mystery and newness to hold?

Three great tortoises, in sharp relief against a non-attention holding background, with the two words, clear cut and distinct above, "Demonstrating Lubrication." The reader's eye is instantly caught; his curiosity immediately aroused. He has seen the big word Zerolene at the foot of the page and probably knows what it is, but he does not pass on to another page and instantly dismiss Zerolene from his mind. His curiosity about the tortoises is still alive and if it nearly died at seeing the familiar word Zerolene it is instantly revived by the first thing he reads, "In a Temple in Japan." Here is mystery and newness again and he reads on, Zerolene still in his mind.

And now the relevancy of the curiosity instigator [sic] and the Zerolene must be shown, the point of the advertisement made and the whole thing done with while the interest is still alive. In the two short concise paragraphs of the advertisement all this is accomplished

and in addition the word Zerolene is used by the reader four times just as he finishes reading. Zerolene is bound to be impressed indelibly upon his mind. It is truly a wonderful advertisement (Sunset 1917b).

At the risk of putting stock in the analytical skills of an inexpert, Barker picked up on a visceral level the aura of mystery and exoticism that McCann likely commissioned de Lappe to convey through this at-first obtuse imagery and the accompanying ad copy. After setting the hook with three tortoises front and center, the text launches headfirst into Japan and temples, causing our focus to dart between the two,



Fig. 4. The mythological *minogame* is characterized by the depiction of a hairy “straw rain-coat” tail of seaweed and algae. Courtesy the National Archives of Japan Digital Archive CC0 (CC0 1.0 Worldwide Public Domain Offering).

picking up along the way the subtle breadcrumbs the bonsai tree, Japanese text, and the architecture represent to create a sense of place. Immersed now in the foreign otherness of a far-off land, the tale that follows connects the dots between these tortoises’ never-ending journey and the miracle that is Zerolene Motor Oil.

A CLOSER LOOK

Based on a review of available paper and digital English language Japanese mythology resources (e.g. www.hathitrust.org, www.archive.org, www.biodiversitylibrary.org, chroniclingamerica.loc.gov, and cdnc.ucr.edu) (presumably, this would amount to a representative sampling of the same English-language books, newspapers, magazines, and journals that would have been available to and possibly influenced de Lappe), consultation with Japanese herpetologists, and consultation with western herpetologists with experience in Japan (for a list of experts consulted, see the Acknowledgments), there appears to be no credible recorded evidence to support the authenticity of the tale embodied in this advertisement. To the best of anyone’s knowledge, the scene acted out in the Japanese tortoise Zerolene ad simply never happened.

Because Japanese mythology and religion (i.e. Buddhism) in particular have become amalgams of local and external traditions, including many originating in China (July 1908, Ashkenazi 2003), it helps to cast a broad net in the hope of finding the roots of this tale. Notwithstanding the why of it all—why would Japanese monks set tortoises upon a Sisyph-

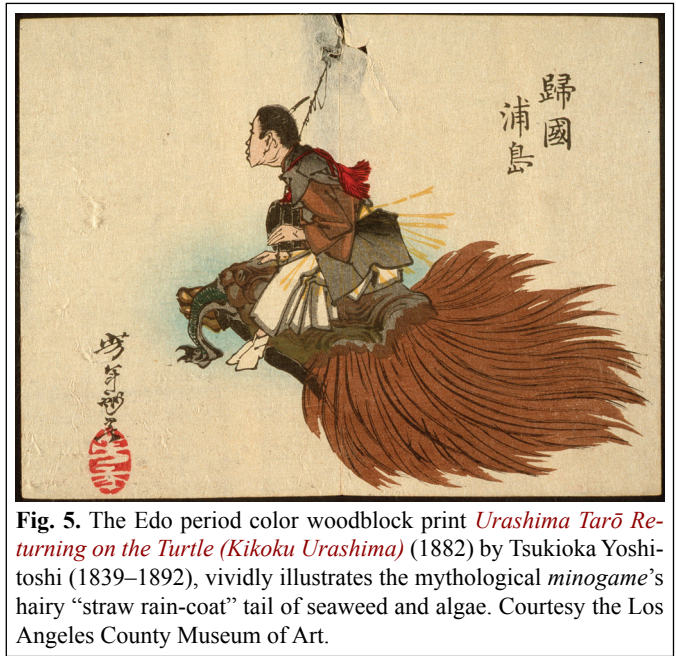


Fig. 5. The Edo period color woodblock print *Urashima Tarō Returning on the Turtle (Kikoku Urashima)* (1882) by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839–1892), vividly illustrates the mythological *minogame*’s hairy “straw rain-coat” tail of seaweed and algae. Courtesy the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

ean task (this question goes unanswered!)—this tale entirely ignores the contradictorily exalted role turtles and tortoises (the two terms are used interchangeably in the anthropological literature) play in Asian mythology.

In Japan, the turtle, or *kame* (or *game*, when a noun precedes the word *kame*; e.g., *umigame* = sea turtle, *hakogame* = box turtle, *midorigame* = green turtle), is known for its longevity and wisdom (July 1908, Allen 1917, Ball 1920b). One variation of the tortoise, the mythological *minogame* (which translates to “rain-coat tortoise” for its resemblance to a straw rain-coat) (Fig. 4) is described and depicted with a hairy tail of seaweed and algae acquired after ten thousand years (July 1908, Allen 1917, Ball 1920b). One such *minogame* makes an appearance in the legend of Urashima Tarō (Fig. 5), in which a fisherman is rewarded for saving a turtle (July 1908, Seki 1966, Ashkenazi 2003). Another Japanese myth, adopted from China, tells of four Guardian Beasts that protect the city of Heian (present-day Kyoto) from threats; one of those celestial guardians is *Gen-bu*, known also as the Black Tortoise or Dark Warrior of the North, depicted as part-snake, part-tortoise (Ball 1920a, Ball 1920b, IDP 2020).

Even if only by accident, the very act of placing tortoises atop pedestals in a temple might also evoke a comparison to statues. Chinese records, for example, indicate that “pious Buddhists ‘carried close to their bodies a tortoise charm thereby to acquire honors’” exemplified by small jade tortoises known as *Ch’ien-Kuei* or “cash-coin-tortoises” (Fig. 6) (Nott 1946). While not strictly statues on the scale usually imagined, these miniatures do represent an example of tortoises cast in stone. On a larger scale, in China, the mythological Dragon king *Bixi*, often depicted as a dragon with the shell of a turtle, continues to be a common fixture in statues—specifically, as the plinth or pedestal of memorial stelae and tablets (Ball 1920a) (Fig. 7). While such sculptures are

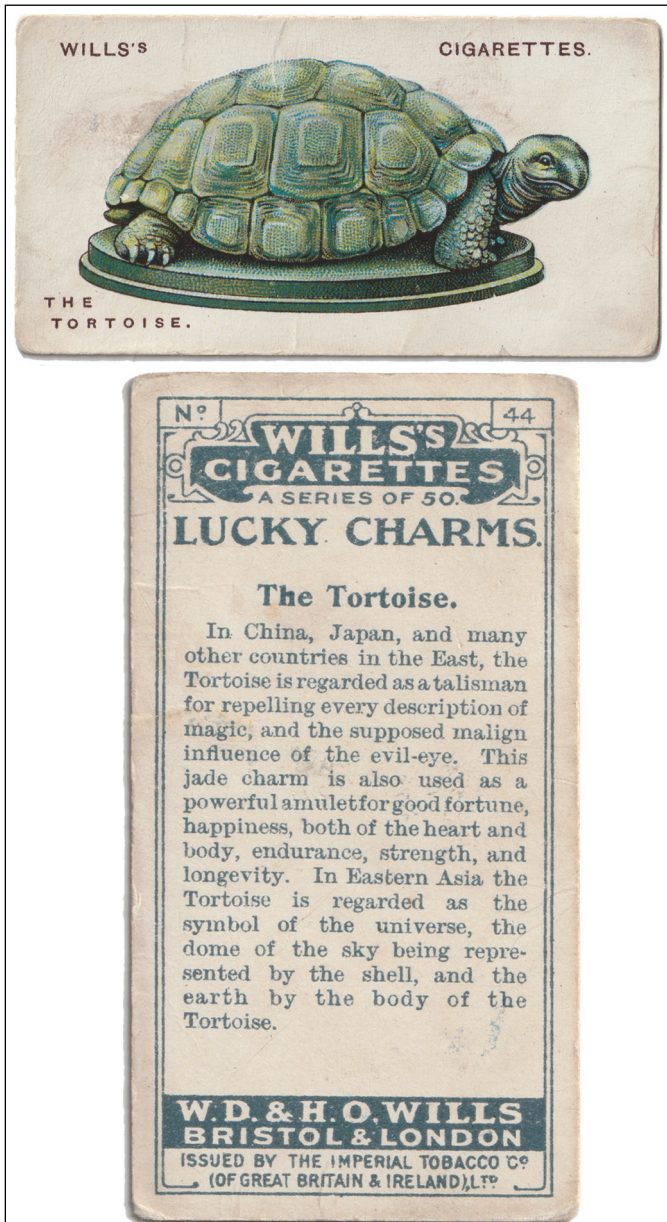


Fig. 6. In China, pious Buddhists were said to have carried charms like this jade tortoise, known as *Ch'ien-Kuei* or a “cash-coin-tortoise,” a practice immortalized in part on this collectible “lucky charms” tobacco trade card issued by Wills’s Cigarettes (Imperial Tobacco Co.) in 1923.

common throughout China, they appear to be less abundant in Japan. No matter where they appear, however, the *bixi* or *kame* almost always appear at the base and rarely appear atop the pedestal.

Ball (1920b), however, mentions an exception. The Enoshima Shrine (aka Enoshima Benten), a Shinto shrine on Enoshima Island, Fujisawa, Kanagawa (prefecture), features a *kame-ishi*, or “turtle stone,” that is patterned like a turtle’s shell (Figs. 8 and 9) and might be what Ball described as a “large monument, consisting of a stone tortoise mounted on a pedestal” that “embellished” the garden. In describing



Fig. 7. In China, the mythological Dragon king *Bixi* frequently appears in memorial stelae and tablets as the plinth or pedestal. Such statues, like the one illustrated in this vintage hotel travel label for The Bridge House Hotel Limited in Nanking (=Nanjing), China, are relatively common throughout China.

his travels through Japan between 1890 and 1893, American expat Patrick Lafcadio Hearn (1894) described encountering this monument: “Near by is a singular stone, set on a pedestal in the court. It has the form of the body of a tortoise, and markings like those of the creature’s shell; and it is held a sacred thing, and is called the Tortoise-stone.” Also at the Enoshima Shrine is a *kame* painted by Hoitsu Sakai in 1803, inset into a recess of the caisson ceiling—the “*Happo-nirami no Kame*” (the turtle glaring at all sides [eight directions]) (aka the Happs Gaze turtle), whose Mona Lisa-like gaze follows the viewer (Hearn 1894, Ball 1920b) (Fig. 10).

Curiously enough, another possible explanation can be found through a closer examination of a practice immortalized in the well-known Edo period (1857) woodcut print *Mannen Bridge, Fukagawa (Fukagawa Mannenbashi)* No. 56 (Fig. 11), by Utagawa (Andō) Hiroshige, one in a series of 119 ukiyo-e landscape prints from the popular *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo (Meisho Edo Hyakkei)*. In this iconic print, a turtle hangs suspended from a string tied around its middle, a common display tactic by vendors in the city of Edo’s (present-day Tokyo) Fukagawa district where turtles and fish were bred, to be sold later near waterways so that the buyers could release them nearby and obtain karma. But to the west in the city of Osaka, vendors instead displayed



Fig. 8. The Enoshima Shrine (aka Enoshima Benten) on Enoshima Island, Fujisawa, Kanagawa (prefecture) also features a *kame-ishi*, or “turtle stone,” patterned like a turtle’s shell. Courtesy of Daderot.

their turtles atop an upright culm, or stalk, of cut bamboo, placed in such a way that the turtle was denied locomotion (Fig. 12) (Gincho 1835)—or, to borrow a phrase from a Japanese tortoise Zeroline ad, “thwarted travel.” A western variation on this theme can be seen in the 1877 illustrated plate *In the Larder* (Fig. 13), which depicts two Diamondback Terrapins (*Malaclemys terrapin*)—one balanced immobile right-side-up atop the foot of an upside-down wine glass, the other equally immobilized upside-down, another example of thwarted travel (Laffan 1877).

Historically, seven turtle species are native to the island country of Japan: the Ryukyu Black-breasted Leaf Turtle (aka *ryukyu yamagame*) (*Geoemyda japonica*), the Japanese Pond Turtle (aka *nihon ishi game*) (*Mauremys japonica*), the



Fig. 9. A close-up detail of the Enoshima Shrine’s *kame-ishi*, or “turtle stone,” patterned like a turtle’s shell on Enoshima Island, Fujisawa, Kanagawa (prefecture) (Courtesy of Natasha Murashev, NatashaTheNomad.com).

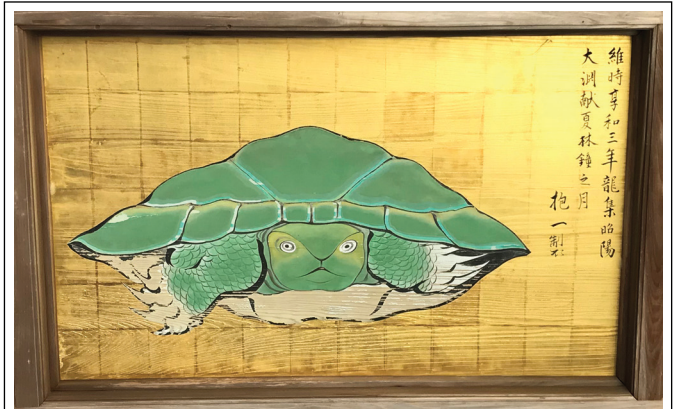


Fig. 10. The ceiling of the Enoshima Shrine (aka Enoshima Benten), a Shinto shrine on Enoshima Island, Fujisawa, Kanagawa (prefecture), features a painting by Hoitsu Sakai (1803) of a kame (turtle)—the “*Happo-nirami no Kame*” (the turtle glaring at all sides [eight directions]) (aka the Happa Gaze turtle). Like the Mona Lisa, the turtle’s eyes are said to follow the viewer as they move through the shrine (Courtesy of Natasha Murashev, NatashaTheNomad.com).

Ryukyu Yellow Pond Turtle (aka *yaeyama ishigame*) (*Mauremys mutica kami*), the Yellow Pond Turtle (aka *minami ishigame*) (*Mauremys mutica mutica*), the Reeves’ Turtle (aka *kusagame*) (*Mauremys reevesii*) (possibly introduced), the Chinese Box Turtle (aka *yaeyama semaru hakogame*) (*Cuora flavomarginata*), and the Chinese Softshell Turtle (aka *nihon suppon*) (*Pelodiscus sinensis*) (Lovich and Yamamoto 2016; Turtle Taxonomy Working Group 2017).

Assuming for a moment that de Lappe carefully researched—or, less likely, had first-hand experience with—Japanese turtles beforehand, these species can be largely ruled out by comparing them, even if only superficially, with



Fig. 11. The Edo period woodcut print *Mannen Bridge, Fukagawa (Fukagawa Mannenbashi)* No. 56 (1857), by Utagawa (Andō) Hiroshige (1797–1858), is one of a series of 119 ukiyo-e landscape prints from the popular *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo (Meisho Edo Hyakkei)*. The bridge’s name—“Mannen”—translates to “ten thousand years,” which may have been a visual/verbal reference to the turtle as a symbol of longevity. The Fukagawa district was also a common place where turtles and fish were bred, to be sold later near waterways so that the buyers could release them nearby and obtain karma.

the “tortoise” depicted in the advertisement. For example, de Lappe’s mystery tortoises lack the well-marked longitudinal keels and serrated posterior marginal scutes characteristic of the Ryukyu Black-breasted Leaf Turtle (Yasukawa and Ota 2008), the low medial keel and serrated posterior marginal scutes characteristic of the Japanese Pond Turtle (Yasukawa et al. 2008), the longitudinal medial keel characteristic of the Ryukyu Yellow Pond Turtle and Yellow Pond Turtle (Yasukawa et al. 1996), the three longitudinal keels and yellowish stripes along the head and neck characteristic of the Reeves’ Turtle (Lovich et al 2011), the distinct medial keel characteristic of the Chinese Box Turtle (Ota et al 2009), and the soft shell characteristic of the Chinese Softshell Turtle.

Morphometrics aside, however, one could reason that de Lappe may have overlooked the prominence of the omni-

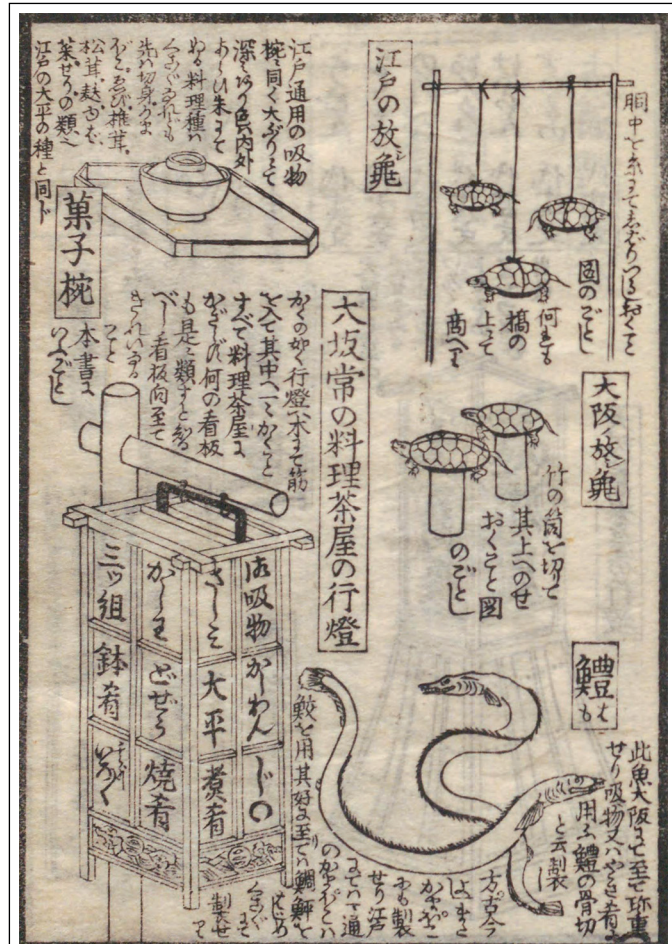


Fig. 12. Hiratei Gincho’s 1835 article in *Word Around Town* [街能噂] describes the two ways vendors displayed turtles. Roughly translated, the illustration explains that in the city of Osaka, vendors displayed the turtles on top of a bamboo stem (“Turtles to be released in Osaka” and “Bamboo pipes are cut and the turtles are placed on top as shown in the diagram”) while in the city of Edo, vendors hung the turtles with thread tied around their middles (“Turtles to be released in Edo” and “Their torsos are tied with a string and hung as shown in the diagram—all are sold on bridges”). Turtles sold in the Osaka style would have been immobilized atop the bamboo stems.

present keel characteristic of Japan’s turtle’s shells, or that de Lappe had instead approached the assignment as more of a cartoonish likeness or loose interpretation rather than a technically accurate scientific illustration (an argument bolstered by his approach to the purported Japanese text, described below). If so, there could be a case made for the Chinese Box Turtle based loosely on its prominently domed carapace, large head, and the drab, dark brown ground color of the carapace (notwithstanding the reddish brown spot typically found on each carapace scute and the pale line that delineates the medial keel) (Ota et al 2009).

In 1916, the closest thing to an English-language field guide to Japan’s reptiles and amphibians was Leonhard Stejneger’s 1907 *Herpetology of Japan and Adjacent Territory*, which was made available not as a traditional field guide



IN THE LARDER.

Fig. 13. The illustrated plate *In the Larder*, prepared for the article “Canvas-Back and Terrapin” as part of a feature article in an 1877 issue of *Scribner’s Monthly*, depicts the finer things in life: oysters, canvas-back ducks, a box of Flor Fina cigars, a case of Bordeaux wine from the Château Pontet-Canet. Among these luxuries are two Diamondback Terrapins (*Malaclemys terrapin*)—one balanced atop the foot of a wine glass, the other upside-down. Both are equally immobilized, not unlike the tortoises in the Japanese tortoise Zeroline advertisement.

(field guides were still in their infancy) but as a scientific bulletin published by the Smithsonian Institution. Therein, Stejneger’s monochromatic plate (Plate XXXIII) (Fig. 14) featured both a dorsal and lateral view which conveniently obscured distinctive characteristics like keels or chromatic markings (Stejneger 1907). Stejneger’s plate was adapted from a similarly monochromatic plate (Plate V) in Günther’s 1864 *The Reptiles of British India* (Günther 1864) that featured similar views. Although these resources existed, and their illustrations would have made the omission of the diagnostic keel forgivable, from what we know about the tall tale upon which de Lappe designed this advertisement, it is probably safe to assume that he did not have a particular Japanese turtle species in mind.

Likewise, the purported Japanese text inscribed on the bonsai tree’s square pot is as indistinct as de Lappe’s tortoise. A close inspection of these characters reveals them to be a weak simulacrum of traditional Japanese kanji, hiragana, or katakana scripts. Instead, the faux script might be better described as an early example of stereotypical “ethnic type” known today as “chop suey,” “chopstick,” or “stirfry” lettering that culturally appropriate brushstrokes and cuneiform suggestive of Asian script (Print 2009). Because there’s no

expectation the average reader of *Standard Oil Bulletin* could read Japanese script, this trick would not have been all that different (stereotypes aside) from the Western type-setter’s *Lorem ipsum* dummy text meant to fill space, an ad-man’s gimmick to monetize the exoticism of this tall tale.

If anything, the paper-thin “mythology” of the Japanese tortoise Zerolene ad bears a closer resemblance to the contemporary “post turtle” joke-cum-phrase common in North America when describing politicians. As one version of the joke goes, following a discussion of past American President George W. Bush’s health-care-reform ideas, one gentleman remarks, “Well, ya know, old Bush is a post turtle.” When asked what a “post turtle” is, he answers, “When you’re driving down a country road, and you come across a fence post with a turtle balanced on top, that’s a post turtle. You know he didn’t get there by himself, he doesn’t belong there, he can’t get anything done while he’s up there, and you just want to help the poor thing down” (Blank 2009). Over time, abbreviated versions of this joke have embraced a more concise wisdom: “Anytime you see a turtle up on top of a fence post, you know it had some help.” While it is unknown when the joke originated, the phrase has been traced as far back as a 1978 sermon by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

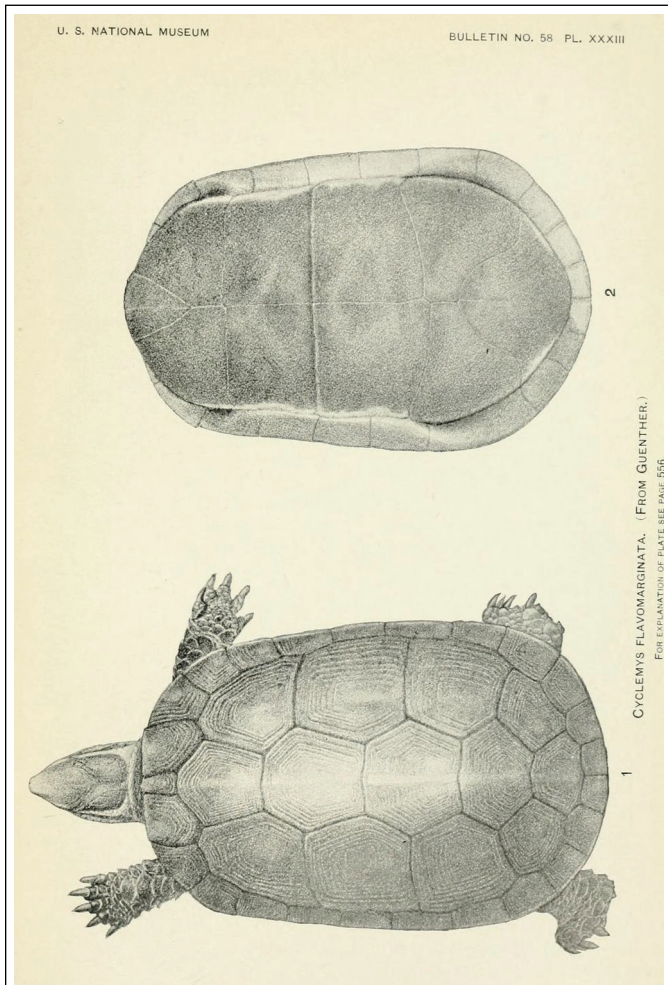


Fig. 14. Among the six turtle species native to Japan, one species most closely resembles the tortoises featured in the Zerolene Japanese tortoise ad: the Chinese Box Turtle. In 1916, the best English-language resource for one looking to learn more about Japan’s reptiles and amphibians was Leonhard Stejneger’s 1907 *Herpetology of Japan and Adjacent Territory* published in the form of a scientific Smithsonian Institution bulletin. Included in Stejneger’s guide was this monochromatic plate (Plate XXXIII) illustrating the Chinese Box Turtle.

Saints general authority Ronald E. Poelman (Poelman 1978), and in print in Mary Doria Russell’s novel *The Sparrow* (Russell 1996).

Assuming the resemblance between the Japanese tortoise Zerolene ad and a “post turtle” is purely coincidental (the ad appears to predate the joke, and the reference is incongruous at best), it is worth re-examining inexpert reader Barker’s suggestion that the Madison Avenue ad-men were indeed cultivating “curiosity... mystery and newness” (Sunset 1917b) to sell a can of motor oil.

“THE ORIENT” AND “THE OCCIDENT”

Given that de Lappe’s Japanese tortoise Zerolene ad draws heavily from Japanese imagery, it is worth examining the



Fig. 15. The intersection of Orientalism and advertising was evident in the tobacco industry, which marketed cigarettes hand-rolled from Turkish tobacco leaf under exotic brand names such as Murad. Produced by the New York-based Greek tobacconist Soterios Anargyros, Murad advertisements capitalized on the exoticism of Orientalist imagery to increase sales, such as this fantastical 1923 ad featuring a fashionable woman in flapper-styled attire riding atop a giant turtle, guiding it with a bull-whip and reins.

history of Orientalism and Japonisme in Victorian America. “Orientalism” is a concept first established by cultural critic Edward W. Said in his 1978 book *Orientalism* meant to describe the West’s (aka, the “Occident;” Europe and America) historically contemptuous representation of the East (aka the “Orient;” Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East). In Said’s own words, “Orientalism [was] a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 1978). At its root, Orientalism embodied underpinnings of superiority over, and a Eurocentric prejudice against, the East when held against the mirror of the West. The clichés employed were inaccurate at best, and were based on cultural representations that emphasized and exaggerated a sense of difference, the exotic, or otherworldliness (Said 1978).

Long before Said defined Orientalism, however, academics understood the caustic relationship that had developed between the West and the East, as exemplified by Basil Hall

Chamberlain, emeritus professor of Japanese and Philology at the Imperial University of Tokyo, in the introduction to his book, *Things Japanese*:

Europe's illusions about the Far East are truly crude. Who would dream of coupling together New-Englanders and Patagonians, simply because arbitrary custom has affixed the single name "America" to the two widely separated regions which these two peoples inhabit? Yet persons not otherwise undiscerning continue to class, not only the Chinese, but even the Japanese, with Arabs and Persians, on the ground that all are equally "Orientals," "Asiatics," though they dwell thousands of miles apart in space, and tens of thousands of miles apart in culture... (Chamberlain 1905).

Because of Europe's—especially France and Britain's—geographic adjacency and long history of colonialism in the "Far East" (China and Japan), the concept of Orientalism first arose in Europe in the late 18th century (Said 1978), but didn't firmly take root in America until after World War II with the transformative urbanization and industrialization of the country (Rosenblatt 2009). That is not to say, however, that the seeds of Orientalism had not already been sown in American soil.

Unlike their European forebearers, early American Orientalism didn't limit itself to the Far East. For example, one way it manifested itself anew was through the exploitation of the "Middle East" (imprecisely, southwest Asia, Turkey, Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula; a geography that overlaps at times with the "Near East") by tapping into a distinct aesthetic built on a material culture redolent of luxury, sensuality, and debauchery mixed contradictorily with uncivilized barbarism. Although this approach was slightly off-brand from the traditional nuances of European superiority and prejudice, it ended with similar results: cultural domestication (Rosenblatt 2009).

As early as 1893, the Columbian World Exposition in Chicago boasted an Ottoman Pavilion that featured Bedouins, belly dancers, and camels (Rosenblatt 2009). In America, Orientalism became especially evident in the consumer culture of the Victorian era (1837–1901) during the 19th century. It was then that "the 'Orient'" became synonymous with romance, mystery, and barbarism" to the extent that "American capitalists exploited and encouraged popular assumptions about the Orient as a means of encouraging impulsive consumer spending, which served as a precursor to modern marketing methods" (Rosenblatt 2009).

Higashi (1994) describes this Victorian retail strategy as follows:

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Americans expressed a fascination with travel in their enthusiasm for museum and world's fair exhibits, postal cards, magic lantern slides, stereographs, panoramas and dioramas... and so forth. As realist representation of the urban scene demonstrated, touring exotic

territory was equivalent to voyeurism rationalized in pedagogical terms... As significant aspects of genteel middle-class culture, the degree of self-control required in the performance of social rituals and the desire to travel to strange, alluring places were surely not unrelated. Orientalism, in other words, was a sign not only of psychic repression but of chronic frustration resulting from the inability to interpret the meaning of coded forms of social intercourse... the mysteriousness of impenetrable social observances was projected onto the enigmatic terrain of the "Other."

In other words, Orientalism gave Americans a socially acceptable way to use consumption as a form of self-gratification (Higashi 1994) or, seen from the perspective of the department store, "to trigger buying on impulse, aiming for the emotions rather than rational thought and calculation" (McAlister 2005). In the late 1890s, as the mass production of consumer goods appeared likely to outpace consumer demand in America, marketing/advertising blossomed to meet the growing challenges of materialism in a new arena: the department store and, by extension, the mail-order catalogue (Rosenblatt 2009).

At its height, the Orientalism that had first found a footing in museum exhibits and travel exposés soon became commonplace in the consumer culture of Victorian America. "An Orientalist aesthetic highlighted the mystery and alluring sensuality of the Orient, through the use of deep, warm colors, exotic patterns, and depictions of oases, harems, mosques, and bazaars" (Rosenblatt 2009).

Nowhere was this more apparent than the advertising campaigns behind cigarettes. With brand names like Mecca, Medina, Murad, Omar, Fatima, and Camel, pre-mechanization cigarettes were hand-rolled from Turkish tobacco leaf. The fledgling tobacco industry marketed their products under the banners of sophistication, luxury, and lavish indulgence (Stanford University 2007, Rosenblatt 2009) featuring women "seen as less of a reflection on Victorian femininity than a fantasy of an exotic enchantress from a foreign land or a modern woman shedding the shackles of Victorian propriety" (Stanford University 2007) (Fig. 15).

European and American interpretations and imitations of the Far East's artistic traditions took many forms. While Orientalism was at heart exploitative, in the 19th century a more affirmative imitation arose in the arts known as Chinoiserie and Japonisme (also, Japonism). The popularity and influence of these movements instead celebrated Chinese and Japanese art and design. These influences can still be seen today in western European visual arts (the works of Vincent van Gogh), performing arts (Gilbert & Sullivan's *The Mikado*), landscaping (Claude Monet Giverny garden), architecture, and clothing (McAdams 2016).

Japonisme arose in post-1854 Europe and America as Japan began to open itself to foreign trade. For more than 200 years, Japan had closed itself off from the world through an isolationist policy they called *sakoku*, the "secluded country,"

but all of that changed when the so-called “bamboo curtain” came down facilitating a surge in trade and travel (Lambourne 2005). Named by art critic Philippe Burty in 1872, Japonisme embodied a broad appreciation for Japan and its culture (Gliem 2008) from fashionable to simple fascination (Sosnowski 2017). Artists inspired by the Japanese arts became known as Japonistes, and practiced a more reflective expression of imitation that copied Japanese processes, papers, and aesthetics. Japonisme reached its peak in the 1890s, but it continued to influence Western artists up into the late 1910s. Nevertheless, even as some continued to immortalize Japan’s pre-commercialized society, the Japanese aesthetic found its way into Western commerce and advertising (Capua 2015) and shone brightly through not only the manufacture, but also the sale, of merchandise that included examples of both fine art as well as replicas (McAdams 2016).

While Japonisme was in many ways a facet of Orientalism—both, for example, were imitative—Japonisme distinguished itself through Japan’s resistance to overt colonialism or domination. The Japanese did not seem to suffer from cultural domestication as other countries did under Orientalism (Alric 2008). Instead, through Japonisme, there was a more equal, consensual exchange of culture in either direction: Japanese arts were westernized just as European and American arts blossomed under the influence of Japan (Kober 2014).

A WORLD OF PURE IMAGINATION

And so it was that de Lappe’s Japanese tortoise Zerolene ad must have found its influence—riding the coattails of equal parts Victorian era consumer culture, Orientalism, and Japonisme to sell, of all things, motor oil through the mystery and allure of a fictitious Japanese temple and three tireless tortoises acting out a never-ending story.

Where along the spectrum described above does the ad fall? Is it imitative in a reflective, affirmative mode in the spirit of Japonisme? Is it reductive or exploitative in the shadows of Orientalism? The answer likely lies somewhere in between. By the very nature of the imagery appearing in an advertisement for motor oil, the ad itself is exploitative—the West commercializing the East by monetizing imagery purportedly portraying a centuries-old practice that hints at mysticism and ritual.

On the other hand, although the ritual is baseless, its inherent aimlessness—the vagaries of the Who? (*Who places the tortoises on the pedestals?*) and the Why? (*Why mustn’t the tortoises make any progress?*) and the What? (*What is the significance of this ritual?*) of it all, even if it is entirely made up—leave so much to the imagination that any thought put into finding a higher purpose behind it becomes ruminative at best. In fact, the very act of fabricating a ritual without purpose that involves a journey with no destination becomes its own self-fulfilling wish fulfillment. The viewer becomes the tortoise, stymied from ever achieving enlightenment. In a spiritual sense, then, the ad is in a way reflective, albeit inadvertently so.

Although the tale continues to capture the imagination even today, that’s where this tale’s story begins and ends—in one’s imagination. Three tortoises immortalized forever in one ad-man’s mind’s eye, raised on pedestals and lionized like statues, and entombed on the dusty back pages of forgotten periodicals. An ignoble finale for three imagined tortoises with no more agency than the ad-agency’s ink that gave them life, trapped on the page as much as they are trapped atop their pedestals.

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