



The Great Wave: Gilded Age Misfits, Japanese Eccentrics, and the Opening of Old Japan

By Christopher Benfey

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When the United States entered the Gilded Age after the Civil War, argues cultural historian Christopher Benfey, the nation lost its philosophical moorings and looked eastward to “Old Japan,” with its seemingly untouched indigenous culture, for balance and perspective. Japan, meanwhile, was trying to reinvent itself as a more cosmopolitan, modern state, ultimately transforming itself, in the course of twenty-five years, from a feudal backwater to an international power. This great wave of historical and cultural reciprocity between the two young nations, which intensified during the late 1800s, brought with it some larger-than-life personalities, as the lure of unknown foreign cultures prompted pilgrimages back and forth across the Pacific.

In **The Great Wave**, Benfey tells the story of the tightly knit group of nineteenth-century travelers—connoisseurs, collectors, and scientists—who dedicated themselves to exploring and preserving Old Japan. As Benfey writes, “A sense of urgency impelled them, for they were convinced—Darwinians that they were—that their quarry was on the verge of extinction.”

These travelers include Herman Melville, whose Pequod is “shadowed by hostile and mysterious Japan”; the historian Henry Adams and the artist John La Farge, who go to Japan on an art-collecting trip and find exotic adventures; Lafcadio Hearn, who marries a samurai’s daughter and becomes Japan’s preeminent spokesman in the West; Mabel Loomis Todd, the first woman to climb Mt. Fuji; Edward Sylvester Morse, who becomes the world’s leading expert on both Japanese marine life and Japanese architecture; the astronomer Percival Lowell, who spends ten years in the East and writes seminal works on Japanese culture before turning his restless attention to life on Mars; and President (and judo enthusiast) Theodore Roosevelt. As well, we learn of famous Easterners come West, including Kakuzo Okakura, whose *The Book of Tea* became a cult favorite, and Shuzo Kuki, a leading philosopher of his time, who studied with Heidegger and tutored Sartre.

Finally, as Benfey writes, his meditation on cultural identity “seeks to capture a

shared mood in both the Gilded Age and the Meiji Era, amid superficial promise and prosperity, of an overmastering sense of precariousness and impending peril.”

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The quests for spiritual fulfillment of the figures profiled here unfold in extraordinary ways. Disaffected by the mercenary state of American culture in the Gilded Age following the Civil War, many of New England's intellectual elite sought a new social order from the largely unfamiliar Japan, a nation whose own intellectuals were in turn looking to shake off years of isolation and forge a new identity as part the international community. Cultural historian Benfey, a professor of English at Mount Holyoke (Degas in New Orleans), seamlessly braids the far-flung adventures of cultural importers/exporters from both countries and offers an enjoyable collection of eclectic and surprising historical narratives about such figures as Isabella Stewart Gardner and Henry Adams. Benfey traces the importation of Japanese culture to the U.S. back to intrepid pilgrims like Herman Melville, who wrote of exploring Asia's "impenetrable Japans." This curiosity boomed in the cultural confusion after the Civil War, when many Americans felt that European philosophy could advance no further except through mysticism, which the exotic Japan was thought to offer. Benfey relates the lives of several Japanese eccentrics who likewise believed that a foreign culture might provide useful tools for a country similarly in the midst of dramatic change. The cultural exchanges that Benfey describes, at times comic, are tantalizing examples of how nations develop and in what ways they are able to learn from each other. Though Benfey sometimes meanders and indulges in digressions into the decadent lives of 19th-century Boston Brahmins, his account is consistently enjoyable and always informative. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From [Booklist](#)

For aesthetes dissatisfied with the upholstered world of late Victorian taste, Japan offered a cultural richness that mesmerized an unusual gallery of American characters. Their collecting and publicizing of all things Japanese animates this braided tour of cultural encounter. Of the people Benfey follows, none but Henry Adams is a household name today, and he was a latecomer to the Japanese fad, a languid, solace-seeking (after his wife's suicide) tourist among Benfey's group. More distinctive are those who initially sailed to Japan after the Meiji restoration of 1868. Benfey recounts Edward Sylvester Morse's seminal importance; he went to Japan as an anatomist of mollusks and returned as a popular writer and lecturer on Japanese style, particularly architecture. Others brought back immense quantities of artwork, or, like muralist John La Farge, sought a creative change in Japan's land- and seascapes. Conveying both rapture and disappointment with Japanese culture, Benfey draws a sophisticated portrait of the period's personalities. *Gilbert Taylor*
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Review

Advance praise for *The Great Wave*

"The close-up brilliance of Christopher Benfey's depiction of the early stages of the encounter between sophisticated representatives of the American Gilded Age and those of nineteenth-century Japan required an assured grasp of both cultures, their assumptions and envies, their gifts and weaknesses, their humor and lack of it. He has portrayed this mutual loss of virginity with grace, wit, and a range of reference that re-echoes the original astonishments and is a pleasure to read."

—W. S. Merwin

Praise for Christopher Benfey

Degas in New Orleans

“Yes, Degas in New Orleans involves a haunted house, ghosts, and titillating couplings, but all elements are solidly anchored in historical events and retold by Christopher Benfey in a deft synthesis of art criticism and historical speculation....An elegant introduction to a city that remains a secretive, seductive metropolis.”

—**Grace Lichtenstein**, *The Washington Post Book World*

The Double Life of Stephen Crane

“In this astute and subtle new reading of Stephen Crane, Christopher Benfey discovers the mysterious process of a life taking shape from its art. Mr. Benfey writes beautifully and is as sharp on the social and psychological dimensions of Crane’s experience as he is on language and literary craft.”

—**Jean Strouse**, author of *Alice James*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Joseph Wilson:

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