



VISIONS OF THE ORIENT

Western Women Artists in Asia
1900-1940



After Japan was “opened” to the West in 1853, westerners gradually turned their attention to Japanese culture in the last decades of the 19th century. European and American artists adapted subjects, styles, techniques and aesthetic theories from Japan and, to a lesser degree, the rest of East Asia. These appropriations were both homage to the “exotic Orient” and ways of interpreting Asian culture for the benefit of western audiences. Western artists were increasingly drawn physically to Japan for short visits. By 1900, Helen Hyde had set up residence in Tokyo, becoming the first of four American and British female artists who, over the next three decades, would make their homes in Japan, and make their careers presenting “Oriental subjects” to westerners. Hyde was soon followed by Bertha Lum, Elizabeth Keith and then Lilian Miller, with the later three artists all working in conjunction—and competition—in Tokyo in 1920. Linked by their gender, their profession, and their interest in Asia, these four artists are the subjects of *Visions of the Orient*.

Helen Hyde, *The Bath* (Detail), 1905, Woodblock print, Loaned by the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, University of Oregon, Eugene, Murray Warner Collection of Oriental Art





Bertha Lum, *The Dragon Well*, c. 1924, Oil on panel, Pacific Asia Museum Collection, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Perkins, 2009.6.1

All four women lived independently of men—only Lum married, and she largely lived apart from her husband before divorcing. All four artists came from backgrounds of relative privilege. And although it was determination that took them across the Pacific, they utilized their money and connections—in the political, business and religious communities—to gain access to the Japanese artists, artisans and publishers who helped them make and sell their art, as well as to the “native” subjects who populate their art. Their pictures of Asia were largely intended for expatriates resident in “the East” as well as armchair travelers in America and Europe. The careers and the art of these four women can be understood in terms of Orientalism, the process by which westerners created knowledge about Asia within the context of an unequal power dynamic between Asia and Euro-America.

Hyde, Lum, Keith and Miller demonstrate the complexity of a gendered Orientalism where western women had a special role in interpreting Asian cultures—cultures often seen as

constituting an exotic, feminine realm. Further, the genres of watercolor painting, woodblock print and travel literature in which these artists worked were seen as appropriately domestic and female spheres for women seeking to make a living in a world dominated by male artists and writers. This exhibition suggests shared themes in the work of these artists: a focus on “unchanging” Asian “tradition,” an emphasis on women, children and romantic landscapes as subjects, and a lyrical naturalism in style. It also shows that each artist interpreted Asia in her own way, constructing a vision of the ‘Orient’ that emanated from her own desires, and could find a market.

In her art, **Helen Hyde** (1868–1919) created a version of Japan as an Eden-like land of women and children, a world without men and beyond modernity. Her pictures are set in gardens or in cozy interiors with symbols of nature and domestic comfort. In her prints, which she called “my children,” Hyde depicts an idealized existence that she could only partially make in her own artistic home in Tokyo. In contrast to Hyde’s pastel and pastoral visions, **Bertha Lum** (1869–1954) began by pictorializing the exotica of a ghostly version of Japan. Lum fashions Japan, and later China, as ethereal places of glowing light, murky forests and swirling waters populated by mystical figures and powerful goddesses. Lum’s pictures are about Asian lore and divine elegance, positing Asia as a place of magical transformation. In such a setting, Lum herself could not only escape the drabness of married life in the American Midwest through the sensual mystery of the Far East, she could make a career selling dreams of enchantment to her countrymen and women.



Elizabeth Keith, *Old Peking: Temple Gate with Camel*, 1920, Gouache on paper, Pacific Asia Museum Collection, Gift of Dr. & Mrs. Aziz A. Khan, 1997.61.2



Lilian Miller, *Rain Blossoms, Japan*, 1928, Woodblock print, Loaned by Scripps College, Claremont, CA, Gift of Mrs. Simon Bolivar Buckner

If Lum saw Asia as muse, for **Elizabeth Keith** (1887–1956) it was a museum. Keith traveled widely in Asia, engaging a network of missionaries and educators. She sought to capture with an ethnographic perspective the customs and costumes of a vanishing Asia, even if she had to provide her models with properly antique outfits. Through the processes of gathering, describing and preserving, Keith constructed an Orient with which she connected emotionally, and which she controlled intellectually—in contrast to the chaos that she often experienced while traveling. Where Keith found sympathetic people in Asia, **Lilian Miller** (1895–1943) looked for romantic inspiration in the landscapes and old temples where she had played since childhood. She is distinct from the other artists in the exhibition due to her birth in Asia, having been born in Tokyo to a diplomatic family. Miller’s Orient is lovely, mysterious, fertile and pure. Both a nurturing maternal presence and a dream lover, it offers gentle mountains, deep forests and moon-lit nights.

Visions of the Orient presents Hyde, Lum, Keith and Miller as painters, printmakers and authors. The exhibition’s object labels that contain the artists’ personal and private thoughts as well as contemporary writings about them acknowledge the artists’ own Orientalism, their struggles to make careers, and their diverse creativity. Whether we see these artists as quiet rebels against patriarchy, or as seductive agents of colonialism, their visions of the Orient comprise a compelling chapter in the making of trans-Pacific culture.

Kendall H. Brown, Ph.D., Guest Curator

Visions of the Orient is generously supported by the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, the Los Angeles County Arts Commission and the International Fine Print Dealers Association. The exhibition is organized by Pacific Asia Museum with the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art.

COVER IMAGE

Lilian Miller, *Pagoda of the Dragon Star, Kyoto*, 1931, Woodblock print, Pacific Asia Museum Collection, Museum Purchase with Funds Provided by Collector's Circle, 2009.10.1



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