The influence of Japanese art and design in Europe during the second half of the 19th century – after the reopening of trade of Japan in Europe during the second half of the 19th century – is well known and generally called “Japonisme.” What still needs to be more explored and much further examined are Japanese cultures affected each other, especially at the time when Japanese men and women were coming to Europe and Europeans were going to Japan to study and teach, blurring the boundaries between these two cultures.

Moser and Hoffmann cited the significant influence of Japanese craft in their 1905 work-programma for the Wiener Werkstätte. While teaching at the Kunstgewerbeschule, both applied Japanese principles and exposed students to various didactic resources, among which the technique of katagami, a Japanese dying method that uses a resist paste applied through stencils, was one of the most significant in the school. The students and artists connected with the Wiener Werkstätte used these techniques, even though less frequently used and less complex than the block printing technique, in the production process of some of their works and textiles and reflects the impact of Japan.

Unfortunately, due to the fragility, none of the stencils produced by the Wiener Werkstätte have survived, as far as we know, unlike the wooden blocks. That bamboo was part of their repertoire is not as a surprise. Nor does the use of stencils, but what makes these two textiles so interesting is that the first one was made by Felice Rix Ueno and reflects the exploration of Japanese culture in Europe, while the second textile, depicting bamboo, is such a blend of two cultures that its origin is uncertain. Felice Rix Ueno, also called Lizze, was born in Vienna on 1 June 1893. She was the eldest daughter of Julius Rix (1858-1927), a rich entrepreneur and temporary director of the Wiener Werkstätte, and Valérie Rix, née Libény (1875-1974). Between 1912 and 1917, she studied at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Vienna and attended classes taught by Josef Hoffmann. On 21 October 1925, she married the Japanese architect Isaburo Ueno (1892-1972), who had graduated from Rissho University in 1922 and was hired at Hofmann’s architecture firm in Vienna. After their wedding, the couple moved to Japan, where Felice Rix-Ueno continued to create designs for the Wiener Werkstätte until 1930. While living in Japan, she taught at Rissho University, her husband’s own private school, the Kyoto Interactive School of Art, and also taught at the Academy. She worked with the Wiener Werkstätte, and setting up teaching methods that were inspired by the Bauhaus, with an emphasis on individual imagination.

While working for the Wiener Werkstätte, she collected several Japanese textiles, books, cover, enamels, etc.). Her major strength was in textile patterns, with a particular interest in Japanese motifs. In these, 69 were designed while she was in Vienna and date from 1913 to 1925, while the 43 remaining ones were presented to Kyoto and date between 1926 and 1930. We do not know if Felice Rix-Ueno visited Japan before her wedding, but what is certain is that her design entitled “Japoneland” dates back to 1923, prior to her move to Japan, and depicts classic Japanese motifs: jagged mountains and pagodas, butterflies, stalks of flowers, fish in ponds, kimono-clad women with fans, and a man with a large fan seated in a rickshaw (jinkihaya). They are block printed in shades of brown, red, orange, green, and purple, and are fastened with a string on a black ground. The motifs follow the contemporary fashion and present a naive simplicity of design, and thus remain unrecognised as Wiener Werkstätte textiles. Her Kyōto period sees the development of more abstract motifs, with delicate lines and colours, testimony of a fusion of artistic traditions in Vienna and Kyoto.

The second textile, depicting bamboo (fig. 2), was designed in 1928. In 1998, on the art market in Munich along with textile samples from the Wiener Werkstätte, it was attributed to this company until 2015. Although it is close to the design called “Bergfalter” by Koloman Moser, it is not longer recognised as a Wiener Werkstätte textile. Its similarities with Japanese katagami suggest that it could have been produced in Japan. The artist’s imaginary and the motifs of transfer and assimilation of cultures could result in a fusion, rendering the attribution of a textile sometimes very difficult.

Further research would allow for a better evaluation of the cross-cultural exchanges between Japan and Europe in the early 20th century. What these two textiles reveal is that, while preserving the identity of each European and Japanese textile, they reflect the cultural exchanges between Japan and Europe in the early 20th century. What these two textiles reveal is that, while preserving the identity of each European and Japanese textile, they reflect the cultural exchanges between Japan and Europe in the early 20th century.