

# Japanese Dragon from Paris Collection in Russian Art of Coloured Stone Cutting Art Nouveau Period

S. Ye. Vinokurov<sup>1,2</sup>, L. A. Budrina<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ural Federal University named after the first President of Russia B. N. Yeltsin,  
19, ul. Mira, Ekaterinburg, 620002, Russian Federation

<sup>2</sup> Ekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts,  
5, ul. Voevodina, Ekaterinburg, 620014, Russian Federation

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The art of Far East countries, namely China and Japan, was an important source for the forms and features of Art Nouveau. However, original works were not the only sources of inspiration. Vivid images of mythical animals, such as two impressive forms of Japanese dragons, penetrated the practices of European craftsmen. This article follows the route of a specific form, and examines the nature of its interpretations, using the example of two stone-cut works by Russian Imperial Lapidary Factories (Peterhof and Ekaterinburg ones). The starting point for these works was an illustration representing a Japanese bronze vase from the Henri Cernuschi collection, published in a French magazine. The discovery and study of this case has provided the exact details to support the general idea about the ways of cross-cultural exchange of Eurasian art at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The article provides a detailed analysis of the decorative elements of a Japanese bronze vase interpreted by Russian stonecutters, and also reveals the features of its implementation in new material. A conclusion is drawn about on the one hand, the discrepancy between the products in question and the main assortment of imperial lapidary factories of the Peterhof and Ekaterinburg. On the other hand, these examples are a convincing illustration of the searches in the Russian art industry of the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

*Keywords:* stone-cutting art, Art Nouveau, Henri Cernuschi, Peterhof Lapidary Factory, Ekaterinburg Lapidary Factory.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

At the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> centuries Russia witnessed sweeping reforms in cultural and political life. The reign of Peter the Great (1672–1725, Emperor since 1721) was marked by large-scale Europeanization: in 1712 he moved the capital from Moscow to St. Petersburg — a city newly built on the western borders of the country, — proclaimed Russia an empire, and introduced western dress, which was exotic for Russians at that time. This turn towards the West led to greater artistic exchanges and active borrowing

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<sup>1</sup> The article is based on a report prepared for the International Scientific Conference “Peacocks, Dragons and Winged Lions. The Fantastic Bestiary of the Orient: Its Circulations and Reinventions in Europe (18<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries)”, March 27–28, 2020, Paris. The conference did not take place due to outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

from the art trends of Western Europe (e. g. Petrov Baroque, Elizabethan Rococo). The new imperial court in St. Petersburg became a point of attraction for European artists, while the new Russian capital became a hotspot for painters, engravers, architects, and craftsmen to express their talents.

Due to the extremely intense cultural exchanges between Russia and European art centres on the one hand, and to the relations with the geographically-close Far Eastern countries on the other hand, Russian art featured distinctive Chinoiserie traditions from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. This explained the sustained interest of the Russian elite both in creating or acquiring replicas, and in collecting original works of art from the Far East.

One of the highlights of Peter the Great's reign was the opening of centres for the processing of decorative stone in Russia. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was a system of imperial stone-cutting factories, which included the Peterhof Lapidary Works, located close to the emperor's residence and specializing in mosaics; the Ekaterinburg Lapidary Factory, located specifically at the coloured-stone deposit of the Ural Mountain Range and which produced works in Russian mosaic technique as well as monumental and interior decoration in cut coloured stone; and the Kolyvan Grinding Factory, some 4,000 kilometers away from the Russian capital near the Altai stone deposits. Despite the long distances between St. Petersburg and the Ekaterinburg and Kolyvan factories, these three imperial stone-cutting factories worked almost solely from the design drawings of court architects, which explains the stylistic unity and high aesthetic quality of the works produced.

The work of the imperial stone-cutting factories in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was tied up with the cultural life of the Russian capital and followed the same style changes. Thus, the empire style of the first third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (including for instance numerous Medici vases and square bowls on a high cone stem) was replaced from the 1840s by revived historical forms and techniques. During this time, the range of production of the factories was enriched with flat and relief mosaics in ornamental stones, imitating Florentine art of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In the third quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century artworks borrowed motifs from European albums on interior decoration, in various revival historical styles.

The most striking example here is the set of objects of Korgon and Revnev jasper made at the Kolyvan Grinding Factory in the 1870s, inspired by the images drawn from *L'art industriel. Recueil de dispositions et de décorations intérieures, comprenant des modèles pour toutes les industries d'ameublement et de luxe*, an album published in 1842 in Paris, by interior decorator Léon Feuchère [1].

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the usual monumental works of the imperial factories were replaced by smaller ones: craftsmen switched from two-meter vases to desk and dressing table sets. The changes in the type of objects produced led to a wider range of model sources. As a result, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the style of objects produced by the imperial lapidary factories was in synchrony with European art trends as Art Nouveau, Japonisme and the new wave of neoclassicism. However, in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the attention of European and Russian craftsmen focused on Chinoiserie style, which enjoyed a new round of popularity, and "Japonisme" or "Japanism", which appeared in the 1860s.

A combination of events produced a crucial opportunity for European artists turning towards the art of the Far East: first, a new evolution after the 1851 Great Exhibition's organization which had included Chinese and Japanese stands; and second, Japan's Meiji Restoration (1868–1869), which put an end to the country's policy of self-isolation. Both

evolutions contributed to increase visibility of original Japanese art appearing on the European art market [2, 8–11; 3, 233]. Beginning in the 1860s, the fashion boutiques and art salons of Paris were filled with Japanese goods and artworks. Porcelain and lacquers, bronze and enamels, light bamboo and stylized wooden furniture, costumes and fans, netsuke and characteristic theatrical masks were especially popular.

One example was the Bing's famous gallery. Another one was *A la Porte Chinoise*, a shop opened in 1862 by Madame Desoye (Louise Melina Desoye, 1836–1909), specializing in exports from Japan, China and India [4] and located in the prestigious Bourse district of Paris.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Japonisme, which resulted from the creative search for historicism in Europe, contributed to the gradual formation of a new European style. Adopting forms which would express the idea of growth, development, and movement, the Art Nouveau style turned to natural themes, including the techniques which Japanese art had long used to depict nature in. However, Art Nouveau processed these images with a brand new flavour<sup>2</sup>.

The composition and image solutions of works then adopted show elements borrowed from Far East iconography by European craftsmen at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In contrast with earlier styles (like Chinoiserie and its revival during the Second and Third Rococo, or Japonism in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), Art Nouveau did not so much rely on borrowing conspicuous elements or dramatic reproductions in the exotic spirit, but rather on penetrating into the essence of another expressive system and picking up the most productive aesthetic techniques. Art Nouveau also borrowed another feature of Japanese art, which ran through the whole of Far Eastern art, to some extent: “This was the principle of an unfinished composition, thereby the theme could be further developed in mind by adding the missing elements” [5, p. 101].

The Art Nouveau bestiary reflects the internal heterogeneity of this style: some images of living creatures are represented with extreme naturalism (for instance the Lalique dragonflies, or Fabergé animal sculptures), while some others adopt a medieval style (as with the Gothic images of owls, bats, spiders by artists representative of the Art & Crafts school). But a particular characteristic lies in the figures of animals, birds and fish similar to those of the Far East (like Fabergé animals, with origins in *netsuke* sculptures or imitations and replicas of Japanese bronze works of the Meiji period by Christofle & Co).

Russia's close contacts with Europe but also with the Far East facilitated Russian collections of works by Japanese and Chinese masters. A particularly noteworthy example of this collecting trend was provided by the Shtiglitz-Polovtcev family in St Petersburg [6]. This aristocratic family formed the museum collection of the Baron Shtiglitz's Technical Drawing School in the 1880s–1890s. Of particular interest was the collection of *netsuke* figures amounting to several hundred original works owned by the Fabergé family [7].

## Sources of the Far Eastern Bestiary in Art Nouveau Decorative Art

The scale of penetration of Far Eastern motifs and forms into the 19<sup>th</sup> century European arts and crafts was determined by increased cultural contacts, the expansion and diversification of ways of penetration of both original works and the artistic language

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<sup>2</sup> This concept was mostly evolved within the “philosophy of life” school, represented by A. Bergson, V. Dilthey, G. Simmel, inspired from F. Nietzsche's idea of the world as the eternal recurrence of beings.

of China and Japan. International exhibitions, the development of museum and private collections, and the multiplication of magazines served as the main channels to saturate the European art space with these exotic themes. International exhibitions appeared in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and became an influential platform for countries to meet and exchange artistic achievements, as well as for private museums to expand their collections. The revival of Chinoiserie can be associated with the creation of international exhibitions. After the very first International Exhibition in London in 1851, China was one of the most prominent exhibitors in almost every event, regardless of economic or political conditions. The official records and reports mentioned the signature features of Chinese ornamental art, “monstrous, distorted forms”, which were an attempt to adapt motifs to the specificity of a particular material (stone or wood) or to imitate natural patterns [I, p. 1247].

China and Japan's engagement in international exhibitions proves that the culture and art of these countries kept stimulating the interest of international exhibitors ever after the 1851 Great Exhibition. Even tensions in political relations between Far East countries, Europe and the USA did not hinder the opening of Far Eastern departments in most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century international exhibitions. In these cases, organisers had to use certain tricks, such as, for example, inviting private European collections, or finding agreements with Eastern rulers on special conditions, in order to facilitate the travels of the exhibitors [8].

It is worth mentioning that the European perception of Far Eastern countries, and valuation of their art, significantly shaped the Chinese and Japanese departments at international exhibitions. Thus, the porcelain and silk products were indispensable exhibits. Official exhibition publications help us trace the evolution of this historical interest. International Exhibition reports show an increased attention for Chinese and Japanese ornamental arts, their techniques and expressive features, such as “free” composition, bright colours and natural motifs during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

One of the important ways in which Chinese and Japanese traditions became integrated in 19<sup>th</sup>-century European culture was the creation of large private collections, like those of Émile Étienne Guimet (1836–1918, museum open in 1889), Henri Cernuschi (1821–1896, museum open in 1898), Clémence d'Ennery (1823–1898, museum open in 1908) and others, some of which later grew into museums. All these collections became the basis for public museums. Active trade interaction with the countries of the Far East in the 17<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries led to the replenishment of European collections with original works of art from exotic cultures.

Those private collections and the resulting museal institutions were important actors of the European cultural landscape in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whose role stretched from participating in major international events to educational functions. The agenda of these museums included public lectures, workshops, the publication and distribution of catalogues and albums introducing the best pieces of their collections.

One should also mention the fact that the wide distribution of visual reproductions of works from museums and private collections, as well as compendiums of ornaments and model samples was stimulated by the new wave of interest in Chinese and Japanese art, and was made possible by new technologies like the mechanization of the preparation of typographical matrixes and methods of image reproduction. The periodical press, which often provided illustrations from collections of Oriental art, was of great importance in

the circulation of visual material, in the form of reproductions of specific objects or particular designs. Printed reports, catalogues, magazines illustrating international exhibitions, albums of ornaments and new designs did not just reach Russia: they were also actively employed by Russian art manufacturers. It should be emphasized that Russian exhibitors were active participants in international exhibitions during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This resulted in widely disseminated/distributed printed materials in/on/throughout the Russian art industry.

A good example of this can be found in lithographies showing new decorative ornaments, from volumes entitled *Nouveaux modèles d'ornements* (n. 50 and 55), kept in the collection of the Ekaterinburg Lapidary Factory in the State Archive of the Sverdlovsk Region [II]. These *Nouveaux modèles d'ornements* were published in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the printer and publisher François Delarue & Fils. Sheet 50 shows a variety of ancient Chinese bronze vessels from the collection of Henri Cernuschi. These are elongated baluster-shape vases, square and round censers, a large spherical vessel with a lid handle in a form of a Taoist deity. Another plate, marked n 55, shows small Japanese vases in the form of bottles and vials. The body of one vase decorated a dragon and plants, while two other vases have handles in the shape of dragons and phoenix heads. The exception is the Chinese traditional tall *gu* vessel with a flared base and an even wider mouth, shown in the center.

Without a doubt, the Russian stone-cutting industry, namely the Ekaterinburg Lapidary Factory, used such illustrations as an inspirational source to renew its line of products, which had traditionally represented European models only. Such printed materials were acquired by the Cabinet of the Imperial Court (a sort of Ministry of the Court) and then widely distributed to the art industries under its authority. The reference found at the bottom of the pages confirms that these items belonged the Henri Cernuschi collection. Cernuschi (1821–1896) was an Italian political emigrant established in Paris around 1850. There, he settled as a banker, economist, and journalist, who actively collected works of fine and ornamental arts from China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam, from Antiquity till the 19<sup>th</sup> century [9].

After the 1873 Paris exhibition in the Palais de l'Industrie, Cernuschi decided to donate his collection to the French capital, provided that the museum should be named after him. To add to this, the collector sponsored the construction of a new museum building located at 7 avenue Vélasquez, near Parc Monceau, in Paris [III]. This collection, which included many works of different periods of Far Eastern and Indian art, was one of the sources for publications during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even before the museum was founded, Henri Cernuschi actively promoted his collection through exhibitions and publications.

Illustrations of objects from his collections were often found in the first works on Japanese art, such as the two-volume book *The Art of Japan* published in 1883 by one of the first European researchers of Japanese art, Louis Gonze (1846–1921) [10]. Many other works of Eastern decorative art from the Cernuschi collection, mainly Chinese and Japanese bronzes, were presented in a dozen and a half issues of *L'Art pour tous: Encyclopédie de l'art industriel et décoratif*, a magazine published in Paris from 1861 to 1906. Several times a month, the subscribers received sheets sewn together into thick notebooks and filled with illustrations and brief descriptions. This magazine was a true encyclopedia of the art schools and styles of the present and the past.



## Japanese Works from the Henri Cernuschi Collection in Russian Coloured Stone

The fact that Russian stonecutters were familiar with this magazine is supported by the List of Products Made at the Peterhof Lapidary Works from 1741 to 1916, compiled on the basis of archive documents, which gives a reference to the *L'Art pour tous...* magazine, although with no mention of its particular issue number. Below is the quote on an archive document dated 1889:

*A vase with dolphins made of solid silica agate mass of original shape. The vase base resembles a dragon, that decorates an ancient Japanese vase, shown in the "L'art pour tous" magazine. The vase cost 1,360 rubles and its manufacturing took 1 year and 7 months. This was the first factory's work of such type [11, p. 478]<sup>3</sup>*



4090

Fig. 1. Drawing of a vase from the collection of Cernuschi in the magazine *L'Art pour tous: encyclopédie de l'art industriel et décoratif*, no. 461 (31 August 1879) [12, p. 1844]

The mention of *L'Art pour tous...* magazine in the archive of the Peterhof Lapidary Works has defined our field of research for that specific work, published in the magazine. Consistent consultation of the magazine numbers, from 1889 back to earlier issues, helped us find an illustration of a Japanese bronze vase (Fig. 1), which the archive entry referred to. Indeed, issue no. 461, dated August 31, 1879, contains an illustration of a Japanese bronze vase from the Henri Cernuschi collection under number 4090 [12, p. 1844].

The magazine shows a vessel of traditional Japanese type with a spherical slightly flattened body and a typical wide mouth. A central medallion is decorated with the Japanese Dragon God *Ryūjin* (Japanese: 龍神), which was the tutelary deity of the Land of the Rising Sun. A similar image of Ryujin can be found, for example, in the print by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798–1861) “Princess Tamatori Steals the Tide Jewels” (1853) (Fig. 2). This woodblock features a legend

about the brave Princess who dived deep into the kingdom of the sea and retrieved a pearl stolen by the Ryujin dragon. The image of the sea god in the bronze vase medallion represents the traditional iconographic image of Ryujin in the form of a dragon with a tall bended body and short legs.

An important decorative element of the vase shown in the magazine was its sculpted handles, placed on the sides of the wide neck. The figure shown on the illustration from *L'art pour tous* presents the same features as another Japanese dragon iconographic figure, *Shachihoko* (Japanese: 鯨虎), a mythical creature with the head of a tiger and the body of a carp. The *Shachihoko* figures are often found adorning roof corners in East Asian archi-

<sup>3</sup> Original text: «Ваза с дельфинами из цельного кремневого агата, с сохранением формы, обусловленной куском самого камня. Основание вазы наподобие дракона, изображенного на древней японской вазе, помещенной в журнале “L'art — pour tous”. Ваза обошлась в 1360 р. Ее изготавливали 1 год 7 месяцев. Оконченное изделие по характеру своему изготовлено фабрикою в первый раз».



Fig. 2. Utagawa Kuniyoshi. Princess Tamatori Steals Ryūjin's Tide Jewels. 1853. Paper, woodcut. Inv. no. 2008,3037.21223. The Trustees of the British Museum. Accessed September 2, 2021. [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A\\_2008-3037-21223](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_2008-3037-21223)





Fig. 3. Shachihoko. Detail of the decoration of the tower of the Kumamoto castle, Japan. Accessed September 2, 2021. [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/f3/Shyachi\\_hoko\\_Kumamoto\\_castle.jpg/675px-Shyachi\\_hoko\\_Kumamoto\\_castle.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/f3/Shyachi_hoko_Kumamoto_castle.jpg/675px-Shyachi_hoko_Kumamoto_castle.jpg)

ecture, with their typical pose bending backward, a head lying flat and a body and a tail rising (Fig. 3). The handles of the Cernuschi bronze vase represent the same distinctive ornament with the same animal features: the head of a tiger and the body of a fish. Unfortunately, our contacts with the present curator of the Cernuschi museum collection failed to find information about the current location of the Japanese bronze work reproduced in *L'art pour tous...* magazine.

The Fersman Mineralogical Museum of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow keeps the “dragon” vase from the Peterhof Lapidary Factory stonecutters, which is an interpretation of the work illustrated in *L'art pour tous* (Fig. 4). The stone-cutter decorated the flat elongated bowl with the figure of the Ryujin dragon god, using the sculpture as a stem for the vase. This produces the image of a fantastic creature emerging from the depths of the sea, embodied by the flat base. For his work, the stone-cutter picked up a large polished agate stone. The layout of the elements in the monolithic stone composition allowed to intensify the artistic effect of the work by using the material’s natural qualities: the play on the colour-hues of the agate, varying from near-white to beige passing through grey and blue, enhances the image of the boiling sea depths. It is worth pointing out the contrasting double white strip in the agate, used to suggest foam under the dragon’s mouth. Semi-transparent layers of stone with dendrites





*Fig. 4.* Vase. Peterhof Lapidary Works. 1889. Agate. Fersman Mineralogical Museum, Russian Academy of Sciences, Inv. no. ПДК-1809. Accessed September 2, 2021. <https://scientificrussia.ru/images/g/27ag-large.jpg>

form the top part of the thin-walled bowl and vase base. The foot of vase was cut from a denser, opaque fragment. The dragon's thick eyebrows and bulging eye were cut in the lightest stone area, so that the natural colour difference of the material emphasizes the sculptural plasticity of the piece.

A few words must be said about the compositional solution here. Bowls of varying depth, supported by a stem in shape of a dolphin or a pair of dolphins, were widely used in European decorative art since the Renaissance and were reproduced in works of almost all available materials and techniques, varying in degree of imitation and in the image of dolphins. The author of the Peterhof Works agate vase also employed this traditional compositional scheme. However, under the influence of the Japanese style trend, he changed the usual European image of a dolphin to a fantastic animal in the Far Eastern version of the image. Thus, the handles of the Cernuschi bronze vessel provided the image of a dragon's grinning muzzle that was borrowed by the Peterhof stonecutter. The image of the dragon's body in the shape of a ring, forming the bowl base, as well as the image of a clawed paw and a pointed elbow were both taken from the medallion of the Japanese vase. The dragon's tail is raised up and serves as the bowl stem. The second support of the bowl stem suggests a splash of water.

Another example using the same exotic source is found in the works of the Ekaterinburg Lapidary Factory. The collection of the Ekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts comprises a sheet with a graphic image of a vase in a shape that was untypical for the factory (Fig. 5). There is no doubt that this is one of the scattered sheets from the folder of works "Made by the Ekaterinburg Lapidary Factory", which included images of works created by stonecutters in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The comparison of the items from the Catalogue with the drawings in the factory folder allowed us to conclude that the work in question is an original stone-cut piece by the Lapidary Factory. The "Flower Garden" vase (no. 14 in this catalogue) was manufactured out of grey-green Kalkan jasper on order no. 999 issued by His Imperial Majesty's Cabinet, dated November 12, 1891. The vase was created according to this sketch in 1892–1894, and its price eventually estimated at 1,381 rubles.



*Fig. 5. Dmitriev, V.A. "Flower Garden vase from Kalkan Jasper" (drawing). A sheet from the folder "Made by the Ekaterinburg Lapidary Factory". 1891–1905. Cardboard, ink, whitewash, watercolor. Ekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts, Inv. no. ГВ-37*

The illustration of the vase shows a wide mouth, which was not typical for Russian stonecutters, but which we previously noted in the Japanese vase from the Cernuschi collection. The body and neck of the vase are decorated with several rows of floral and geometric ornaments. However, the attention is mostly attracted by the medallions running around the body of the vase. There must have been eight medallions, although only five of them are visible on the sketch. Small medallions are decorated with a geometric grid, two others exhibit flowers like chrysanthemums or peonies, which are intricate symbols in the culture of China and Japan. The central medallion features a coiled dragon.

Having compared the illustration of the Flower Garden vase with other works by the Ekaterinburg Lapidary Factory shown in its Catalogue we may state that the vase decoration combined the techniques of shallow carved relief and chemical matting with vapors of hydrofluoric acids [13, p. 35], widely used by the Factory at that point of time. This technique provided a contrast between the polished darker jasper surface and the lighter rough details.

Despite those thorough changes, the work by the Ekaterinburg Factory easily reveals the features of the original: the shape of the vase, the ornamental frieze dividing the mouth and the body, and the image of a fantastic reptile, were all obviously borrowed from the Japanese work from the Henri Cernuschi collection described above.

## Conclusion

This paper has studied two works of Russian stone-cutting art which served as illustrative examples and helped to trace the complex evolution of a motif which appeared on an artwork imported by a collector from Japan to France, which was then illustrated in a popular French publication, and was finally re-interpreted by Russian stonemasons in diverse works — an evolution which clearly shows the role of mediators (like the Paris collection and the French magazine). The article then reviewed the various coloured-stone interpretations and modifications of this one Japanese bronze piece. In each of these, the individual qualities of the stones (natural pattern, various opportunities to work with the surface texture apart from bronzes) allow for a distinctive image that remains mysterious and unusual for the European public.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, cultural exchanges between the countries of Western, Central and Eastern Europe and the Far Eastern empires of China and Japan thus reached an unprecedented level of intensity. The European market was not only supplied with original works. Amid the active development of the art industry and the expansion of the education associated with it, printed publications increased in number and significance. Through the periodical press, works of art reached different subscribers and readers, even if these had no opportunity of visiting the countries they were reading about, where artworks originally had been, or the cities where they were still kept. The newly available sources made it possible to master the sculptural language and signature motifs of China and Japan in many different ways, and to include them in the common practice of ornamental artists.

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## Authors' information:

Sergey Ye. Vinokurov — PhD in Arts, Senior Lecturer, Senior Researcher;  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7548-8651>, [serg.vinokuroff@gmail.com](mailto:serg.vinokuroff@gmail.com)

Ludmila A. Budrina — PhD in Arts, Associate Professor; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8099-5292>,  
[ludmila.budrina@gmail.com](mailto:ludmila.budrina@gmail.com)