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# Okakura Tenshin's Renaissance: Between Action and Contemplation

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It is difficult to say when exactly the Renaissance entered for the first time the cultural and historical awareness of the Japanese intellectuals. The influx of missionary and protestant culture on the Bakumatsu and early-Meiji era public debate made so that many important intellectuals portrayed the Reformation as the main turning point in European history, from which Western world supremacy allegedly came. An interesting variation is the case of Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901), whose basic tenets are expressed in his *Bunmeiron no gairyaku* (An outline of a theory of civilisation, 1875). Fukuzawa praised individuality as the sparkle from which Western civilisation rose above the others—something that historians such as Burckhardt in Europe had described as the main product of the Renaissance—but ascribed it to the Goths as ancestors of the French.<sup>\* 1</sup> The art of the Italian Renaissance found its place in the knowledge of the most cosmopolite and cultivate among the Japanese already since the 1870s, but it is important to stress here already how such introduction did not happened under the clear heading of the Renaissance. Whereas references to Periclean Athens and Renaissance Florence as the symbols of the two acmes in Western history had already became a trope of the discourse on the

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<sup>\* 1</sup> Here there is a possible reference to the debate on individualism which developed between England and France among utopian socialists, especially Owenists, and the Utilitarians.

West, a proper historicisation of figures like Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci was yet to come. In the early Meiji period, to the majority of the Japanese proto-intellectuals, Renaissance art was the expression of the universal genius of the Western civilisation rather than the product of a specific cultural period in history. In the world of politics and diplomacy, lessons from the Western powers arrived in the form of intellectual tradition and history of thought and not only observed practices. Thus, in the 1880s, Inoue Kowashi (1844-1895) had Machiavelli's *The Prince* translated, in order to introduce to his fellows the rules of the new international scene that Japan was going to weather.<sup>\* 2</sup> In his lengthy introduction, Inoue did not contextualise Machiavelli's personal and political conditions within a properly historical background and made no mention of the "Renaissance." Recently, Nakae Akira (1944-) has traced back some of the first appearances of the Renaissance as a conceptualised self-standing historical period in Meiji era publications.<sup>\* 3</sup> He locates one of the first contextualised uses of the the word "Renaissance" in the famous global intellectual and defender of the Asian cause Okakura Tenshin (1862-1913). Nakae suggests that Okakura was using "Renaissance" in a way similar to that we conceive of it today. I beg to differ and reckon that, precisely because he does not, exploring Okakura's take on fifteenth and sixteenth century Italy and Europe is important for our study.

## 1

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Born Okakura Kakuzō, Tenshin is famous to the European and American public as the author of *The Book of Tea* (1906), a work he wrote directly in English, same as his—at least apparently—more politically challenging *The Ideals of the East* (1903), *The Awakening of Japan* (1904) and *The Awakening of the East* (posthumous 1938, originally written during his first trip to India in 1901-02). This he could do, because he had spent a large part of his days as a boy and a young man in an English speaking environment. Son of a

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<sup>\* 2</sup> Machiavelli, Niccolò. *Keikokusaku (The Prince)*. Sugimoto Kiyotane (trans.) Tokyo, Shūeisha 1886. Another important Meiji era man of the State, Hayashi Tadasu (1850-1913), translated *the Discourses on Livy*, for the first time in 1906. Although this translation appeared still in the Meiji era, the situation of Japan after the victorious war against Russia was a far call from the state of minority in which Inoue and Nagai accomplished their work.

<sup>\* 3</sup> Nakae Akira, "Meiji jidai no runesansu gainen. Tenshin to Chogyū (The concept of Renaissance during the Meiji era. Tenshin and Chogyū)," *Jinbunronshū* 23 (2005), p.1-23.

lower level samurai-turned-merchant, his father entrusted his education to the missionaries J.C. Hepburn<sup>\* 4</sup> and S.R. Brown in Yokohama. Thus, since he was six, Okakura learned how to write and speak English fluently, albeit at least partially neglecting education in Japanese language and culture. Such education created that kind of new man that the most audacious Meiji reformers had dreamt of. However, Tenshin, the *nom de plume* he chose for himself, followed a different path from that towards the complete civilisation/westernisation that fate seemed to have in store for him.

In the 1870s, Okakura studied at the Kaisei Gakkō, the precursor of the Imperial University of Tokyo, where he received tuitions in philosophy by the eccentric American professor Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908). Fenollosa was an American of Spanish origins. His family, as we know from the preface his wife appended to the posthumous edition of his *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* (1912), was one of musicians, a tradition that went at least so far as his grandfather, who was born in Valencia. The Fenollosa family ended up all moving to the United States. The generation of Ernest's father changed religion, customs and embraced the new democratic beliefs which were forming in the New World. On his mother side, his family had established its name in international trade, namely with Asia.<sup>\* 5</sup> Besides such international background, Fenollosa rounded his personality and *Bildung* in Harvard, studying philosophy in particular. He became a follower of both Spencer and Hegel, philosophers which he then popularised among his students in Tokyo.<sup>\* 6</sup> Invited in 1878 to become Professor of Philosophy and Political Economy, he moved to Japan for what should have been a short stay. He continued in such position until 1886, having, at last, the title of Professor of Aesthetics added to his position. In Japan, Fenollosa developed a deep love and admiration for Japanese traditional art, of which he became a scholar and collector.

Fenollosa was a convinced supporter of Japanese traditional art, which he considered superior to decadent Western modern artistic expressions. He accused the latter to have fallen into materialism while the former, he asserted, had maintained its spiritual core. Scholars agree that Fenollosa thought of such opposition in the terms of a Hegelian an-

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\* 4 Incidentally, James Curtis Hepburn was the Hepburn who invented the official transliteration system of Japanese in latin scripts. The system is still in use today, although some minor variations have been introduced. See: Yasuko Horioka, *The Life of Kakuzō, Author of The Book of Tea*, Tokyo, Hokuseido 1963, p. 7.

\* 5 Ernest Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art: An Outline History of East Asiatic Design*, pp. ix-xii.

\* 6 Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, *cit.* p. xviii.

tithesis, something that, together with the belief in inter-national Darwinism, he passed on to his disciple Okakura. His perspective, expressed in 1882 in a very successful public lecture entitled *An Explanation of the Truth of Art*, clashed with the then established trend to introduce in Japan Western art and its technique. The previous decade had seen the Japanese administrators invite a group of Italian artists, notably Antonio Fontanesi (1818-1882) and Edoardo Chiossone (1833-1898), to teach local artists how to paint in the European style. Against such trend, Fenollosa found proselytes in his crusade to reinstate the old local artistic practises.

Fenollosa and Okakura bonded and, together, devoted the early 1880s to the recovery of Japanese art, which they considered in peril of disappearance after the tumultuous events of the Meiji Restoration and the general iconoclast and anti-Buddhist mood. They teamed up with the bureaucrat and future Genroin Kuki Ryūichi (1852-1931)<sup>\* 7</sup> in a mission to track down and catalogue all the most important traditional artistic artefacts of Kansai. In their effort of saving Japan's pictorial, sculptural and architectonic legacy, they were, in fact, reinterpreting the local productions in the terms of "traditional art," a concept originally foreign to their making. It was a way of interpreting their mission as somewhat akin to the Renaissance men, taking on themselves the burden to revive a culture in crisis.

In 1882 Okakura and Fenollosa founded the Kangakai (Society for the Appreciation of Painting), the aim of which was to promote, by means of lectures and expositions, the importance of traditional art. The two were also among the promoters of a new national academy of arts, the first to be concerned with the local techniques and manners. In the course of the preparation for this new establishment, Okakura and Fenollosa travelled to Europe and America in order to collect information on the latest advancement in art management and conservation. This represented the first major trip to the West done by Okakura. In 1889, the new school saw the light with the name of Tokyo Bijutsu Gakkō and incorporated and transformed the former official school of painting Zuga Torishirabe Gakari. The following year, Okakura became the head of the academy. He proved to be a resourceful but also erratic administrator, with an odd penchant for strange uniforms and ceremonials. Fenollosa, finally no more the sole responsible for the management of traditional art in Japan, left all posts he held in the Far Eastern empire and moved back to the United States in that same 1890. There, he accepted a job offer as curator of the newly

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<sup>\* 7</sup> Incidentally, Kuki Ryūichi was the father of acclaimed philosopher and phenomenologist Kuki Shūzō, author of *Iki no kōzō* (*The structure of iki*, 1930).

established Department of Oriental Art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. From then on, he did not work anymore on a fixed basis for the Japanese Government and visited the country only in a private capacity.

It is at this point that Okakura's life took a turn for the worse, one that was self-inflicted. There has been ample dispute around the causes and roots of the mayhem which affected Okakura's life during the 1890s. Already in 1990, Notehelfer tried to provide a synthesis and a critique of the various opinions produced, mostly in Japanese academia, over this topic.<sup>\* 8</sup> In those same 1990s, an interest in Okakura's role in the emergence of anti-systemic Panasianism emerged among scholars, notably in India and Japan. Before we analyse how these events are linked to our analysis of the creation and interpretation of the Renaissance and rebirth myths in Japan, it will be necessary to lay down the facts, as they appear in most of Okakura's biographies.<sup>\* 9</sup>

At the helm of the Tokyo Bijutsu Gakkō, Okakura proved to be somewhat unpopular, letting his flamboyant personality run unbridled. Famous is the costume he designed for staff and students of the Tokyo Bijutsu Gakkō, based on supposedly Nara period garment. The uniform created embarrassment among his colleagues and disciples and is just one of the eccentric pseudo-historic attires that Tenshin wore in his public appearances around the world.<sup>\* 10</sup> Nevertheless, he remained staidly in charge of the affairs of the school until the second part of the 1890s, when everything unraveled. He started to have problem with alcoholism and to behave erratically in public. Fatally to his status, his affaire with the wife of his patron Baron Kuki Ryūichi was exposed. In 1898, he was eventually forced to leave the head of the Tokyo Bijutsu Gakkō and, with the most faithful among his former staff, founded, the following year, a private institution, the Nippon Bijutsuin, with the

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\* 8 F. G. Notehelfer, "On Idealism and Realism in the Thought of Okakura Tenshin," *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, xvi:2 (1990), pp. 309-355.

\* 9 Besides the above mentioned Notehelfer, I found especially useful in my biographic reconstruction the following works: Horioka, *The Life of Kakuzō*, cit., and Ōka Makoto, *Okakura Tenshin*, Asahi Shinbunsha, Tokyo 1975. See also the collective book edited by famous critic Hashikawa Bunzō, *Okakura Tenshin: hito to shisō*, Heibonsha, Tokyo 1982.

\* 10 It is notorious the use he made of kimono and hakata while in the United States of America, even in the 1880s, when the Japanese elite considered improper, if not downright boorish, the use of traditional clothing especially in presence of foreigners. However, more revealing is the anecdote narrated by Surendranath Tagore, nephew of Rabindranath, and cited in Notehelfer, "On Idealism and Realism in the Thought of Okakura Tenshin," cit. p. 327. Apparently, Okakura had a Chinese cloth designer draw a replica of a taoist sage dress, as it appeared in traditional paintings, and sported it in India to the amusement of the bystanders.

finality of fostering the traditional arts. Though, the administration of the new establishment revealed difficult, given his perduring personal problems and amid financial hardship. By 1901, Okakura had left Japan for a long tour of India, from which his career as a panasianist thinker advocating the renaissance of the Eastern continent officially started. In India, Okakura came into contact with Bengali intellectuals and political activists who were struggling under British rule with the aim to free their homeland from colonialism. Art, even garment and clothing, as expression or idealisation of cultural roots and values, had always been political in Okakura's mind. Now, in India, he must have seen that in the clearest and most tangible way possible in the coming together, for instance, of the independentist paintings of Nandalal Bose—whom he met in person—with the armed rebellion of groups such as the Anushilan Samiti.<sup>\* 11</sup> It is in this period that Okakura wrote his first systematic work in English, the unpublished *The Awakening of the East*, which we have mentioned above and that was destined to become, not without a certain dose of exploitation, a bible of panasianist Japanese propaganda during the period of the continental expansion and the Pacific War.<sup>\* 12</sup>

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Awakening, regeneration and renaissance, applied to the whole of Asia, are terms which will, later on, come to define a specific Japanese discourse on history, politics and geography. The dream of an East coming to his senses, the dream of awakening from a nightmare, occupied Okakura's intellectual life from the last years of the nineteenth cen-

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<sup>\* 11</sup> The relationship between armed resistance and artistic production in Bengali independentism is a delicate topic. Peter Heehs offered his interpretation of how Okakura related to this duo in "Foreign Influences on Bengali Revolutionary Terrorism 1902-1908," *Modern Asian Studies*, xxviii:3 (1994), pp. 533-556. To better understand the personal relationship between Okakura and his Indian hosts within the more general framework of nihonga exchange with Bengali nationalist art, cfr.: Ienaga Shigemi, "The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus in the First Half of the Twentieth Century (1901-1945): Rabindranath Tagore, Arai Kanpō, and Nandalal Bose," *Japan Review*, xxi (2009), pp. 149-181.

<sup>\* 12</sup> In 1902, while in India, Okakura started writing the work in English as a pamphlet under the tentative title of "We are one." In 1938, his son and grandson, Okakura Kazuo and Koshirō, published it as *Risō no saiken* (理想の再建 The reconstruction of the ideals). The text saw then a second publication in 1939, under the editorship of Asano Akira as *Toyō no kakusei* (東洋の覚醒 The awakening of the East). Previous Okakura's long works in Japanese were the result of collections of notes taken during his lectures.

tury up to his death. Looming on the background, there was the Western Renaissance, the defining moment of European history which had separated modernity from the rest. Okakura's theory on this constitutes one of the references for the development of a State-supported panasianism during the interwar and wartime period. However, Okakura's thought took form within an environment in which such terms and historiographical connections had already been established in a somewhat different discourse. For example, when one looks at Okakura's colleague and former teacher Fenollosa, one notices that the theme of an Oriental renaissance was already there, with a focus on the lost occasions of the past, rather than an eschatological undertone pointing at a future rising. In his work in two volumes, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, which the American wrote roughly in the same period in which Okakura penned his English work and which then his wife published posthumous, the idea of a potential and unaccomplished renaissance of the East surfaced in different chapters. In Fenollosa's Hegelian mind the point was to reverse the harsh sentence pronounced by Hegel himself in his lectures on the history of philosophy concerning the immutable nature of the Chinese mind and, hence, the stagnation of Chinese civilisation. It is a well-known fact that, according to Hegel, while world's spirit never rest, some civilisations, like the Chinese, have reached a non-developmental point ages ago. For this reason, Oriental thought is represented by Hegel as essentially "past" and it finds a peculiar place in his history of philosophy. It is a preliminary part which does not really belong to the history of the "true" philosophy. In the following paragraph I will summarise Hegel's theory on the Orient and provide some more basic details on his perspective.\*<sup>13</sup>

Oriental philosophy proper is, for Hegel, more specifically those religious cultures (e.g.: gnosis) coming from the East that, at the end of the Roman Empire, percolated into the subjective thought of the West. That kind of culture, thought the German philosopher,

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\* 13 For a more detailed analysis which does not limit itself to the pages of the Lessons on the History of Philosophy, see: Michel Hulin, *Hegel Et L'Orient: Suivi D'Un Texte de Hegel Sur la Bhagavad-Git'*, Vrin, Paris 1979. For Hegel's—scanty—interest in China, see: J. Stewart, *Hegel's Interpretation of the Religions of the World: The Logic of the Gods*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018. One must remember that Hegel was not completely unaware of the most recent development of Sinology, which, precisely in his time, constituted itself as an academic discipline. Hegel met in person Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat, considered the first academic sinologist, when he visited Paris, and remained in contact with him. For the relation of Hegel's "Orient" to his German background and especially to Kant, cfr. Jean-Yves Heurtebise, "Hegel's Orientalist Philosophy of History and its Kantian Anthropological Legacy," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, xlv:3–4 (2017), pp. 175–192.

only brought to the West—the cradle of true philosophy—a spiritual sublimation of the intuition that belonged to Asia as historico-geographical prehistory of the world. Such influence allegedly consisted in the introduction of incommensurability which was later superseded by the Christian Church (Patristic Philosophy and its Medieval development).<sup>\* 14</sup> Hegel states that, besides and before this, what is more generally called Oriental philosophy is the religious viewpoint of the eastern people. The latter looks like philosophy, but this is because it lacks the clear subjectivity, always present in the West, and, therefore, has the character of universality. Greco-Roman anthropomorphic deities, Jesus Christ, the God of the Hebrews are all endowed with “free individuality”, differently from Eastern deities and powers, like Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, Hegel opined. Similarly, Hegel asserts, the Western believer is in a dynamic and dialectic relationship to the absolute and thus he is a free individual who opposes the thought’s tendency to the universal. On the contrary, he sustains, the “substantial”, the “essential”—a philosophical notion—is the only truth of the Oriental religions, and the individual possesses a value in its own only if it identifies with it. Thus, concludes Hegel, no separation between philosophy and religion, between nature and spirit, is possible. There would be, in other terms, no humanistic perspective—that is, strictly speaking, no perspective at all—within Asian culture. This meant also that, to Hegel, the unity of Oriental culture was a given, determined by its non-philosophical and abstract relation to nature and the absolute, not by the concrete elaboration of an aware perspective on existence and self-identity. Its different cultures—China, India, etc.—were united, mainly, in the absence of the elaboration of individuation and subjectivity. It is fundamental to grasp at least the more basic implication of Hegel’s position because many of the rebuttals and animadversions by Japanese intellectuals against the widespread Western conviction of Japan and Asia as inevitably backward originated within or against a Hegelian framework—or, one could say, the Hegelian-Herderian framework.<sup>\* 15</sup> The main problems were: a) the essence of Asian (Oriental) culture as a self-conscious actor, b) its immobility and fundamental incompatibility with modernity, c) the impossibility of a rekindling of lost glories once the role played was over. All this issues, the last one

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<sup>\* 14</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, Berlin 1833-36, pp. 182-186.

<sup>\* 15</sup> It is not the place here to analyse the impact that Herder’s idea of *Volksgeist* had to play in prewar Japan. Here we can only point out how Herder’s older account of the Chinese civilisation characterised it as signed by a lack of freedom visible in the political relationships of the subjects to the constituted powers which tended to infantilise the people and deprive them of true responsibility. Herder has, nonetheless, a much more positive opinion on ancient Asia in general, India in particular, than Hegel. Cfr.: J.G. Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, Riga/Leipzig, Hartknoch 1784-91.

in particular, implied a relationship to the historical and spiritual possibilities of a renaissance. By this we do not mean that the majority of the authors we examine were Hegelian *strictu sensu*. As Wallace K. Ferguson noted already in 1948, "It is thus extremely difficult to determine the extent of Hegel's direct influence in individual cases, the more so that Hegel himself represented a synthesis of ideas stemming from nearly every trend of thought in the preceding century. Hence ideas that have a suspiciously Hegelian ring may in fact be either the result of independent currents of thought or merely the expression of a climate of opinion saturated with the Hegelian miasma."<sup>\* 16</sup> However, the imprint of Hegel's teleology, even if sometimes as a second hand received notion, was strong on the discourse of which the counter-narrative of an Asian cultural revival presented itself as a confutation or a variation.

Fenollosa, himself a Hegelian by formation and conviction, and a philosophy professor in the newborn Tokyo Imperial University, had undoubtedly an influence in setting the debate on the terms of the East-West relationship. This appears clearly from his thought on the Renaissance and its latent possibility in China, expressed in Hegelian terms *contra* Hegel. Fenollosa clearly criticised from what was the Hegelian standard perception of China when he wrote:

It will certainly be a strange thing for European scholars and a public who have been accustomed to regard Chinese culture as a dead sea level of uniformity for three thousand years, to read the words of men who wrote hopefully in Northern Sung; such words as those of the artist critic Kakki, who alleges that "it is the very nature of man to abhor all that which is old and cleave to that which is new." The whole round of Sung culture is an immense storehouse of records that show Chinese humanity for three centuries building upon everything which we are disposed to disregard as un-Chinese.<sup>\* 17</sup>

And, to argument his idea of a crack in the uniform wall of stagnation—to show a potential for individualisation, creativity and dynamism—he resorted to the analogy between Song dynasty and the European Renaissance.

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<sup>\* 16</sup> W.K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*, p. 169.

<sup>\* 17</sup> E. Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art. An Outline History of East Asiatic Design*, Heinemann, London 1912. Quoted edition: Stone Bridge Press/IBC Publishing, Berkeley/Tokyo 2007, p. 300.

In early Sung keen intelligence had driven China toward scientific method in reasoning and in industry; she was on the verge of ante-dating the European invention of the Renaissance. But the check upon it everywhere was subtle, quiet and deadly. It lay at the base of the Chinese brain, in the educational system itself. \* 18

Such Renaissance, prefigured, almost reached and, finally, tragically lost during the Song dynasty, bore a specific characteristic: that of religiosity or spirituality. Something that, in Fenollosa's mind, had gone lost in the Italian Renaissance.

In these great movements of Northern Sung, Zen Buddhism began to play a conspicuous part. Neither Taoist nor Tendai mysticism appealed to the university scholars. "Back to nature" was the cry, whether of incipient scientists or of pious Buddhists. [...] Metaphysical Buddhism was already dead in China, even before the mystic. Certainly the most æsthetic of all Buddhist creeds is this gentle Zen doctrine, which holds man and nature to be two parallel sets of characteristic forms between which perfect sympathy prevails. [...] It has something of the openness and humanism of the Renaissance, without its somewhat empty Paganism. \* 19

Fenollosa adhered to the typical narrative, which had originated in late eighteenth century Germany and among anti-catholic authors, of an inherently decadent and ossified nature of Confucian ritualism. However, he, a man who ended his life as a practicing buddhist, wanted to highlight what he considered the creative sides of the Sinosphere, especially Chan Buddhism. This appreciation for certain aspects of the Chinese and Japanese tradition, those he deemed more directly relating to the aesthetic and sensual observation and appreciation of nature, referred also to another aspect of Fenollosa's thought, one he had in common with many intellectuals of his era who had mixed an interest for Hegelian themes to a career as art critics. It was a disdain for the degrading of modernity into industrialism and materialism, which he share with many intellectuals and critics of his time and the preceding decades. From this perspective, the aesthetic appreciation of the

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\* 18 Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, cit., pp. 299-300.

\* 19 Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, cit., pp. 300-301.

Renaissance, which was present in many of those who felt that way, went along with a sense of loss for the religious sense of life. Such was the case of men such as the English Walter Pater (1839-1894), the author of the very successful *The Renaissance* (1873), who played a major role in the establishment of a discourse on the Renaissance in Japan. From the perspective of Fenollosa, raised in the Hegelian tradition, the de-spiritualisation of the West rose a question on the finality of the historical process. Its implication from a Hegelian perspective was daunting, as it showed the limits of the idea of a teleologic path of the Spirit culminating in the Western modern civilisation. Fenollosa, with his own experience of the "Orient" was in a position of vantage to address this issue. Confronting the difficult debate on the advent of materialism, he could, within a perduring Hegelian logic of Thesis and Antithesis, enlist the East as a cure for the West, as an ingredient towards a future synthesis of progress and spirituality. At the same time, Fenollosa's theory also implied something that could have been of secondary importance to him, but that would also constitute a recurring topic in the Japanese thought on modernity and the nation: the idea of a Japanese and Asian potential to self-modernise, starting from their own roots. In other words, the idea that renaissance had been there, at arm-length, sometimes in the past, but that the chance had been missed, left the potentiality for modernisation dormant but not dead—an idea that was going to have its best theoreticians in postwar modernists intellectuals, namely Maruyama Masao (1914-1996).

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The idea that Fenollosa conveyed to his Japanese students and collaborators, that it was not only the East that needed to learn from the West, but that the West too had to revive its own spirit through the contact with the East, became one of the components of Okakura's message to both his Asian and his American acquaintances. After his fall in disgrace, the latter had been forced to leave his appointments at the head of the Tokyo Bijutsu Gakkō and at the Imperial Museum of Fine Arts, but remained in the committee of the Imperial Art Commission. The committee, thus, agreed to pay for his trip to India, officially for the purpose of investigating in the antiquities of that land. Back from his trip to India, Okakura spent two years in Japan and then left again for the United States, sailing away from the coasts of Japan the same day in which his motherland entered the war against Russia. Thus, in 1904, being a Japanese in North America meant something special as the Asiatic nation was fighting its way towards the stardom of civilised, colonialist

powers. In the United States, Okakura took up a position as advisor at the same Boston Museum of Fine Arts in which Fenollosa had worked. In Boston he got on friendly terms with Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840-1924), a rich socialite and patron of the arts. Gardner, a close friend of the famous critic and historian of the Italian Renaissance Bernard Berenson (1865-1959) and of his wife Mary (1864-1945) was thoroughly fascinated with Tenshin. She introduced him to his local connections and had him perform the role of the “Japanese” at her social gatherings in her villa inspired by the Italian Renaissance. From that period on, Okakura travelled back and forth from Boston to Asia, often on a mission for the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. This arrangement lasted until 1908, and, in the meanwhile, his activities in Japan declined in importance. The original site of his school was abandoned and his disciples relocated out of Tokyo, to his new villa in the countryside of Northern Kantō. Okakura grew accustomed to this itinerant life until, in September 1913, already preparing for a new trip back to the United States, he fell ill in Japan and died.

In America, Okakura had presented Japan in a way that could be described—and has been described by different writers—as adapted to American understanding, or as domesticated, even commercialised. We will not enter in this fray here. What we rather want to stress is the contrast between Okakura’s production before and during his American period. On the one hand, Okakura’s visit to India as well as his previous and following relationships with Indian artists, intellectuals and activists, the Irish-born sister Nivedita included (Margaret Elizabeth Noble, 1867-1911), spoke the language of panasianism and anti-colonialism. On the other hand, his late self-appointed mission in the United States, was, with the support of influential patrons of the arts, to disabuse a Western public, often composed of rich women, of the prejudices regarding his homeland. It is possible to detect a progressive toning down of Okakura’s anti-Western stance. When he set foot on the American continent, with the Russo-Japanese war raging on the other side of the world, his rhetoric was still very confrontational. One can see that in his public address at the 1904 St. Louis Louisiana Purchase Exposition,<sup>\* 20</sup> which still employed the metaphor of the sword to express the relationship between East and West. Progressively, Okakura

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\* 20 Okakura was invited at the last time, in the place of the director of the Louvre Museum, to deliver a speech at the St Luis exposition. His lecture, entitled ““Modern Problems in Painting,” was then published in 1905 and translated in German in 1907. For an analysis of Okakura comparison between art and war, cfr.: Mizuta, Miya Elise. ““Fair Japan”: On Art and War at the Saint Louis World’s Fair, 1904.” *Discourse* 28.1 (2006): 28-52.

moved past such martial rhetoric, although he maintained an affection for the idea of Asia and the West as opposing entities. In images, then materialised by his former pupil Yokoyama Taikan (1868-1958) in painting, he spoke of the East and the West as two dragons facing each other. While this passage was, in all probability, also a process of at least outward adaptation to the new condition in which he was working since 1904, there was a question of sublimation of the enemy too. Always in 1904, he published in New York *The Awakening of Japan*, a work he had written mostly before leaving his homeland, in which the theme of what he called “the white disaster” loomed still large. However, in the following years, he started to focus more on the explanation to a Western audience of the true nature of Japan. His later work, *The Book of Tea* (1906), did not focus on the unilateral and potentially violent reversal of this entrenched system of representation as his writing, up to *The Awakening of Japan*—published the year after he set foot in Boston for the first time—did. Independently from him venting it in public or not, Okakura remained throughout his own life disheartened by the representation of Japan and Asia in Europe and North America. \* 21

This change from a more aggressive comparison and confrontation between East and West to a more peaceful exposition of the East inner worth, happened within the framework of a neutralisation of the revolutionary force of the vocabulary of the awakening and the renaissance—its depoliticisation—in both Okakura himself and in his intellectual environment. To understand this, we must, first of all, look at the works for which Tenshin became famous in Asia and received praise as a panasianist publicist: *The Ideals of the East* and *The Awakening of Japan*. We will look at how a vocabulary of restoration and awakening mixes with analogies and parallelisms drawn from the European, namely Italian, Renaissance. Here, as a side note, some brief reference to the Asian and especially Indian context in which Okakura's rhetoric of renaissance as national awakening takes place will be useful. We will then rapidly focus on what the same Italian Renaissance meant to the American milieu in which Okakura ended up.

What Okakura was grappling with in his English books was providing an alternative explanation for the trajectory that had brought Asia and Japan to their current state. Thus, he wanted to give to a global audience a perspective on the “spiritual” and cultural forces generating Eastern history that run against the hegemonic representation advan-

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\* 21 The sensation is strong in the correspondence held with Indian poet Priyambada Devi (1871-1935), which he met during his last visit to India in 1912. Okakura, Kakuzō, and Sunao Nakamura. *Collected English writings*. Heibonsha. Tokyo, 1984, Vol. 3.

ced by the Europeans. This meant re-writing history into a non-sequential way, disentangling Japan and Asia from the straight-forward hierarchy that European nineteenth century discourse had shaped—The Hegelian unidirectional progress of the spirit; the Christian, namely Protestant standard of morality; the evolutionist worldview applied to civilisations. In order to reach his goal, Okakura was going to reconstruct Asian civilisation as a unique active entity and to present Japan as its highest synthesis and champion. In this way, he could have depicted Japanese success as the result of inner factors and the first instance of Asian awakening. The point at stake was to show how the ingredients and prerequisites for modernisation were already contained inside Japanese history and civilisation, independently from the influence of the West. Actually, Okakura remarked, Japan had achieved success quite against to the process of Westernisation which some misguided authority in the early Meiji period had tried to enforce. And, as an instance of Japan's necessity to remain faithful to its own roots, Okakura made the case of its battle to save local art against the uncritical introduction of Western art.

So far, we have given a simple synopsis of the main aim in Okakura's English work. What is peculiarly interesting for us is the method Tenshin choose in order to explain to his English speaking audience this essential distinction between Asia and the West and to reverse an image of inferiority that the European had shaped in relation to the "Orientals." One of the main argumentative strategy that Okakura used was that of showing Japan not as stuck in the past, as less advanced on the same path, but of having a history of its own—an Asian history—running on a parallel path. Such parallelisms Okakura constructed by means of analogies with European history. The crucial turning point of Japanese history, the Meiji Restoration, he likened to the Italian Renaissance.

In the following paragraphs we will examine this analogy, but, first of all, lets give the word to Okakura himself. In his *The Ideals of the East*, the author states that many of the great leaders during the Meiji Restoration had opposed the uncritical imitation of policies form the West and that, nevertheless, had recognised the necessity to acquire the best practices from their modern adversaries. To balance the flood of new knowledge coming from the West, Japan had had to recover his own ancient knowledge, intertwined with the universal civilisation of Asia. It is thus that:

...modern Japan holds a unique position in history, having solved a problem not comparable perhaps to any, save that which faced the vigorous activity of the Italian mind in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For at that point in its development the West also had to grapple with the double task of as-

similating, on the one hand the Greco-Roman culture precipitated upon it by the rise of the Ottoman Turks, and on the other the new spirit of science and liberalism which, in the discovery of a new world, the birth of a reformed faith, and the rise of the idea of liberty, was helping to uplift from it the cloud of medievalism. And this twofold assimilation it was that constituted the Renaissance. \* 22

In Okakura's mind this return to the classics mediated through a new and scientific—archeologic—spirit was especially visible in the arts, where Meiji restoration had revived the interest in the pre-Edo period refined paintings, statuary and performances. According to Okakura, the process of rediscovery and a new sentiment towards the traditional and religious arts, first damned as useless in the middle of the effort to modernise the country, was alike to the “revelation” of the Graeco-Roman masterpieces to the “early Italian of the Renaissance.” And in this “early Italian”, we can grasp the meaning that the analogy of the Renaissance had for Tenshin. For him, the Meiji Restoration had created the new Japanese: it had shaped a modern national subject out of the finest clay of Asia. \* 23

*The Ideals of the East* became a classic and propelled Okakura on the international intellectual scene, as one can judge from the fact that, on the occasion of his lecture at the St. Luis' Exposition, he was introduced as its author. In the following English work, *The Awakening of Japan*, Okakura went back to the history of Asia, stating that its unity, achieved fully under the sign of Buddhism, had been broken under the weight of Mongols' and Muslims' attack. Thus, Tenshin saw the unitary culture of Asia as a quite exclusive matter, with arguably equally “Asian” components pushed outside of this cultural sphere. Once he had reduced it to this Sino-Indian tradition, he could reconstruct Asia as a path leading to Japan. He described Japan as the receptacle and repository of this ancient culture, in its most pristine and pure form. Tenshin thought that, oppressed by the Tokugawa regime, its ideology and its void formalism, Japan, like China and India before it, had sunk into the “night of Asia.” However, he pointed out in the second chapter of the essay, turned into the dormant repository of all Asia, Japan was like a Chrysalis. From such sleeping but still powerful background, Okakura explains, the success of modern Ja-

\* 22 K. Okakura, *The Ideals of the East, with Special Reference to the Art of Japan*, London, John Murray 1903, pp. 220-21.

\* 23 Okakura, *The Ideals of the East*, cit., pp. 224-25.

pan was born. This is an important point for us, because it brings us back to the analogy with the Italian Renaissance. Okakura writes:

It seems to be the general impression among foreigners that it was the West who, with the touch of a magic wand, suddenly roused us from the sleep of centuries. The real cause of our awakening, however, came from within. \* 24

Like the Renaissance, the Meiji Restoration had in itself its own presuppositions; it contained the means for “reform” an “revival,” already within its foundations. Starting from such conviction, Okakura could even predate the spiritual beginning of the Japanese renaissance, to the era of Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801), the eminent Nativist scholar, whose teaching bore social and political fruits with the Mito school. As Tenshin puts it: “This was indeed the era of Renaissance in Japan.” \* 25 Okakura did not say this explicitly, but the analogy between the nativist school of *Kokugaku* and the work of Motoori on the one hand and the Italian Renaissance on the other was not just a superficial likeness in their effort to revitalise and give shape to a national culture. The Italian Humanists and Motoori also shared a philological approach to antiquity and a certain degree of awareness of the historicity of their matter of study.

Nevertheless, the Italian Renaissance was not only a fit analogy, a model to explain to a Western audience the exploit of Meiji era Japan. It was also an event the positive narrative of which Okakura intended to reverse in front of his English speaking readers. Because, in the end, far from being only an age of artistic and cultural splendour, “The Italian Renaissance marks the time when, freed from its chains, the roving spirit of Western enterprise first began to seize upon any corner of the globe where was aught to be gained.” \* 26 In other words, Okakura wanted to point out that the Renaissance, which European scholars represented as an age of expansion had to be seen, from an Asian perspective, as a time of contraction. In this sense, one could say, the Meiji era *tanquam* renaissance, was a regenerative moment in response to the European Renaissance.

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\* 24 K. Okakura, *The Awakening of Japan*, New York, The Century Company 1905, p.70. Elsewhere, Okakura goes back again and again to the Renaissance analogy, like when he writes of the “dragon-spirit of change” impelling Meiji Japan towards always new ideas and ideologies: “Like the initiators of the Italian Renaissance, we had to solve the double problem of restoring the old while absorbing the new.” *Ibid.*, p. 140-41.

\* 25 Okakura, *The Awakening of Japan*, cit., p. 85.

\* 26 Okakura, *The Awakening of Japan*, cit., pp. 101-02.

While Okakura named epochal change “the spirit of the dragon,” he also used, on different occasions, the metaphor of the two opposing dragons to illustrate the relationship between East and West. One could thus say that, in order to face a dragon—the impetus of a rapidly changing, evolving and expanding civilisation—Japan and Asia had to embrace themselves the spirit of change. Though, as the West had built its present strength not only on innovation but also on the reinterpretation of its own past, similarly, Asian nations had to look back in order to spring forward. Because, in the end, a true renaissance, as showed from the Japanese case, could not but originate from one’s own native ground. Such perspective connects tightly Okakura, the less reassuring Okakura, the part of him which was not a party-goer in the Bostonian high society, to the independentist movement in India and to the Bengali Renaissance.

#### 4

The Bengali Renaissance, a nationalist reform movement born among Kolkata local intelligentsia at the beginning of the nineteenth century, took soon the name of renaissance. The definition of renaissance became canonical with the 1920 book by Śri Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950) *The Renaissance in India*,<sup>\* 27</sup> but intellectuals such as the poet Bankim Chandra Chatterji (1838-1894) had already popularised the term by the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>\* 28</sup> When Okakura visited India, he was notably in relationship to the Tagore family, many members of which, including the famous poet Rabindranath (1861-1941) and his nephew Abanindranath (1871-1951), were at the forefront of the movement.<sup>\* 29</sup> The movement asserted, with some degree of simplification, that India had lost its spiritual force and, only now, could wake it again. Parallels to the Italian Renaissance were drawn, but their limitation did not escape the Indian intellectuals and activists. Aurobindo summarise them clearly in his above mentioned essay.

Aurobindo wrote his *The Renaissance in India* partially in a dialogue with an ho-

\* 27 Ghose, Aurobindo. *The Renaissance in India*. Prabartak Publishing House, 1920. The essays' collection had originally been published separately on the nationalist review *Arya*.

\* 28 Schildgen, Brenda Deen. “Sri Aurobindo: Renaissance in India and the Italian Renaissance.” in: Schildgen, Brenda, Zhou Gang, and Sander Gilman, eds. *Other Renaissances: A New Approach to World Literature*. Springer, 2006, p. 134.

\* 29 Concerning Okakura relationship to Rabindranath Tagore and its significance for the elaboration of a new perspective on Asia as a whole, see: Bharucha, Rustom. *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin*. Oxford University Press. New Dheli, 2006.

monymous book by the Irish poet, theosophist and independentist James H. Cousins.<sup>\* 30</sup> Cousins' book, notably in the second chapter, explicitly thematised the relation between renaissance of the arts and national awakening. In its political implications, it took reference to the coeval movement which was taking place in those years in his country of origin, Ireland, then just about to separate from the United Kingdom. Aurobindo recognised this relation and stated that one should compare the current Indian revival to the Celtic Renaissance rather than to the original Italian iteration. The latter, he reckoned, was "an overturn and reversal, a seizure of Christianised, Teutonised, feudalised Europe by the old Graeco-Latin spirit and form" and not a "re-awakening," which was what India was striving for.<sup>\* 31</sup> In other words, the original Renaissance had not happened within a colonised or conquered nation. It had been the fruit of Europe's inner strife. The awakening, a term that we can find also and before this essay in Rabindranath Tagore and, of course, in Okakura, implied the necessity of revitalising one's own roots.<sup>\* 32</sup> Aurobindo compared India's situation to that of Japan:

A swift transformation scene like that which brought into being a new modernised Japan, would have been out of the question for her [India], even if the external circumstances had been equally favourable. For Japan lives centrally in her temperament and in her aesthetic sense, and therefore she has always been rapidly assimilative; her strong temperamental persistence has been enough to preserve her national stamp and her artistic vision a sufficient power to keep her soul alive. But India lives centrally in the spirit, with less buoyancy and vivacity and therefore with a less ready adaptiveness of creation, but a greater, intenser, more brooding depth; her processes are apt to be deliberate, uncertain and long because she has to take things into that depth and from its profoundest inwardness to modify or remould the more outward parts of her life.<sup>\* 33</sup>

Aurobindo was critical of the early generation of Bengali reformers who, starting with

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<sup>\* 30</sup> James H. Cousins. *The Renaissance in India*. Ganesh & Co. Madras 1918.

<sup>\* 31</sup> Ghose, Aurobindo. *The Renaissance in India*, cit., pp. 3-4.

<sup>\* 32</sup> For a more extensive explanation of Aurobindo in the context of the Bengali Renaissance, see: Chatterjee, Kalyan K. "The Indian Renaissance: European Text and Indian Context." *Indian Literature* 35.4 (150 (1992)): 51-60.

<sup>\* 33</sup> Ghose, Aurobindo. *The Renaissance in India*, cit., p. 18.

Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), had tried to enlighten India through the erasing of local culture and the adoption of Western science and social practices.<sup>\* 34</sup> Given India's nature, he thought, it was not possible to follow that road swiftly and, at the same time, maintain the national's soul intact, like Japan had managed to do. While India awakening had to produce itself in the domain of pure spirit and religion, the success of Japan, he suggested, could be seen exemplarily in its arts.

We focused here on Aurobindo as he was the clearest voice on renaissance in India, his work coming as a synthesis of a secular debate. However, historical links between him and Okakura are an established fact and we know that Aurobindo had met Tenshin at least one time, as a guest in Rabindranath Tagore's house. In other words, the terminological entanglement embracing renaissance and awakening and spanning different languages is rooted in this transnational community of scholars and activists that included Okakura. Such community saw Renaissance as spiritual regeneration for the Asian cultures and debated how much for the West had to be part of it and how fundamental the contribution of the autochthonous tradition was destined to be. Okakura was one of the first Japanese to foster the panasian potentiality of this discourse. Against the narrative—widespread in Asia—according to which Japan represented a model for the creation of non-Western independent and modern countries based on Western science and value, Okakura and its international acquaintances fostered the image of a Japan which had succeeded in retaining its essence and build on it its future, despite the necessary but dangerous assimilation of Western technique. It was not a mere continuation in the idea, that had played a major role in Japan and China, of Western technique and local values. The perspective that these scholars and activists advanced here was a more dynamic one, implying the necessity to re-interpret the local cultures and traditions, since the advent of the West had created a distance between past and present, a loss of one's roots.

In this debate and in his works, Okakura was refusing the idea of renaissance as a unitary process, the same for all the nations of the world and individualising the awakening as the possibility inherent within dormant particular cultural spirits. However, as we wrote already, Tenshin was not content of enunciating this possibility as belonging to each and every nation of Asia. In his mind, as the Italian Renaissance had provided the basis for the shaping of a unitary culture of modern Europe, the awakening in Asia had to be transnational, unearthing and reviving the common roots of Eastern culture. From such perspective, Okakura's self-appointed mission in India was subservient to his more

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<sup>\* 34</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

general plan. He reclaimed Indian culture (subjectivism, humanism) to Asia. His position was diametrically opposed to the Herderian-Hegelian idea of Chinese culture developing in isolation from India and from the Herderian-Schlegelian filiation of European, namely German, culture from the Indo-European civilisation. As he eloquently wrote, in one of his most famous passages from *The Ideals of the East* (1903):

Asia is one. The Himalayas divide, only to accentuate, two mighty civilisations, the Chinese with its communism of Confucius, and the Indian with its individualism of the Vedas. But not even the snowy barriers can interrupt for one moment that broad expanse of love for the Ultimate and Universal, which is the common thought-inheritance of every Asiatic race, enabling them to produce all the great religions of the world, and distinguishing them from those maritime peoples of the Mediterranean and the Baltic, who love to dwell on the Particular, and to search out the means, not the end, of life. \* 35

Okakura was reclaiming India to Asia and severing its ties to the West. It was fighting partition from external forces. And, in doing this, Tenshin also opposed the reduction of culture to race, asserting the limitedness of all taxonomic conceptions of people. This he styled as the strong network of Asian races. \* 36

## Conclusions

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The passage that Okakura made moving from his Indian concerns to the gilded world of US' East Coast was a momentous one, independently even from his ability to adapt to the new context. From aesthetics as politics, he found a new environment in which aestheticism reigned. There, renaissance was no more (national) awakening, it stood for contemplation and exoticism. Tenshin's aesthetic soul, which his Indian friends and acquaintances had seen as so typical of the geopolitical strength of Japan, turned into an

\* 35 Kakuzo, Okakura. *The ideals of the East*. John Murray. London 1903, p. 1

\* 36 "For if Asia be one, it is also true that the Asiatic races form a single mighty web. We forget, in an age of classification, that types are after all but shining points of distinctness in an ocean of approximations, false gods deliberately set up to be worshipped, for the sake of mental convenience, but having no more ultimate or mutually exclusive validity than the separate existence of two interchangeable sciences." *Ibid.*, p. 3.

object of art. Okakura resented the change, although he kept endeavouring to have a new image of Japan and the East emerge in the West. Even his *The Book of Tea* (1906), his most famous work in Europe and America, still projects an image of the Eastern civilisation that is at loggerhead with the widespread opinion of the time among the general public, who saw Asian as weak and effeminate. At the same time, *The Book of Tea*, Tenshin's truly American book, moved towards a different, less confrontational rhetoric. Finally, beyond the intention of the author himself, it was often read as a work of aesthetic Orientalism. Murai Noriko has sustained that this turn in Okakura's depiction of Asia might be due also to his desire to disprove the other received notion of that time, that of the Yellow Peril.<sup>\* 37</sup> I remain skeptical about this explanation, but I think that another observation by Murai is of crucial importance. She noticed how the tea master in Okakura's work presents strong analogies to the critic as depicted by Walter Pater in his book on the Renaissance.<sup>\* 38</sup>

In 1905, one year prior to the publication of *The Book of Tea*, Isabella Stewart Gardner had Okakura perform a tea ceremony in her mansion and described the experience in the terms of an exalting religious ceremony. The account, which stresses the aestheticist aspect of the happening in similarity with the catholic rituals which the socialite loved so much, is contained in a letter she wrote to Bernard Berenson. The fact that Berenson was the receiver of that missive, tells us something concerning the milieu in which Okakura's new take on the Japanese cultural opening to the world took place: amid Renaissance connoisseurs and collectors—Gardner's villa, today a museum in Boston, was built on the model of a Venetian Renaissance palace. The vision of the Renaissance Gardner had formed through the like of Berenson was the product of shared imagination and sensibility which had been nurtured in the reading precisely of authors like Pater. Berenson in particular was a great fan of Pater and an attentive reader of his work, although, at the same time, also the attentive reader of the contemporary German more rigorous scholarship.<sup>\* 39</sup> Within such milieu of art collectors and evaluators, the Renaissance was quite alike Japan in their being objects of aesthetic contemplation. It was an exotic receptacle of beauty and refinement.

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\* 37 Murai, Noriko. "Okakura's Way of Tea: Representing Chanoyu in Early Twentieth-Century America (< Special Issue> Meiji Literature and the Artwork)." *Review of Japanese culture and society* 24 (2012). pp. 70-93, at 79.

\* 38 Murai. "Okakura's Way of Tea." cit., p. 83

\* 39 Barolsky, Paul. *Walter Pater's Renaissance*. Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park 1987.

Thus, Okakura, which had come to the West, especially after his Indian experience, in order to tell the story of renaissance as Asian awakening, ended up surrounded with people who thought Asia, notably Japan, alike to Renaissance: an object of aesthetic consumption. Both the Japanese and Renaissance arts had recently become fashionable in the American society and Berenson, besides Renaissance art, was also a collectors of artefacts from Asia.

## **Okakura Tenshin's Renaissance: Between Action and Contemplation**

**Francesco CAMPAGNOLA**

The present article explores the representation of the Renaissance in one of the main intellectual figures of Meiji era Japan, Okakura Tenshin, who became famous worldwide as the defender of Japanese and Asian cultural traditions. The article analyses the relationship Okakura established with his former mentor Ernest Fenollosa and the exchanges he had later on with the Bengali independentist artistic and intellectual community, as well as with the circle of collectors and patrons of the arts which gathered around Isabella Stewart Gardner and included the famous Renaissance art expert Bernard Berenson. Through this different and varied company he took, we flesh out Okakura's peculiar cultural and symbolic perspective on renaissance, spanning ethnic and nationalist desires for regeneration and awakening, as well as the aesthetic cult of European fine arts.