

An Interview with Peter Grilli



Peter Grilli and Consul General Masuo Nishibayashi of the Japanese Consulate in Boston at the presentation ceremony of the Third Class Order of the Sacred Treasure from the Government of Japan, June 2003.

In 2003, Peter Grilli, President of the Japan Society of Boston, received the Third Class Order of the Sacred Treasure from the Japanese Government in recognition of his activities in cultural exchange between Japan and the United States. Born in New York but raised in Japan from the age of five, Grilli has been active in cultural interactions between Japan and the United States throughout his professional career. He is widely known as a writer and producer of films about Japan (Shintō: Nature Gods and Man in Japan and Dream Window: Reflections on the Japanese Garden) and as an arts manager specializing in introducing Japanese traditional and modern arts abroad. In 2004 Peter sat down in Cambridge, Massachusetts with Kathleen Woods Masalski of the Five College Center for East Asian Studies at Smith College to discuss his award, the Japan Society of Boston's 100th Anniversary, and his thoughts on United States-Japan relations.

Masalski: *Peter, I'm certain that the readers of Education About Asia join me in congratulating you on your receiving this most prestigious award. Please tell us a little bit about it.*

Grilli: Thank you. Let me say, first of all, that this award is not for any single work or achievement of mine—but rather for many activities, spread over many years, attempting to promote cultural exchanges with Japan. I feel like I've been engaged in this all my life, and I've been helped in these endeavors by many other people. I'm one of those extremely lucky people who's able to make a profession out of work that he loves doing. I grew up in Japan, and I feel I benefited enormously from that experience. I've tried—in many different ways—to communicate my feelings about Japan to others. Right out of school, I worked for a publishing company called Weatherhill—editing, translating, and writing books about Japan. I hope they were pretty good books; at least I put a lot of sweat and tears into trying to make them good. I also made several documentary films about Japan, taught people about Japan, worked for two Japan Societies (in New York and Boston), worked with PBS, and did consulting about Japan for CBS News and various other media organizations. Much of what I've done in working with people who had to “cover” Japan but had little or no knowledge of the country was to try to make their “product” a little deeper or more sophisticated than it might have been otherwise.

Masalski: *You told me earlier that you think one of the main reasons you received this prestigious award is that you're heading the Japan Society of Boston at a significant time in its history.*

Grilli: Yes, I think that the people in Tokyo who decided on the award knew a bit about my background and about my having grown up in Japan, but I think they gave it to me mainly because they knew about the Japan Society of Boston's 100th Anniversary. They felt it important to recognize the Society at this important moment in its history.

Masalski: *So tell us about the Society's Centennial celebration that is now underway.*

Grilli: The Japan Society's Centennial is celebrating, first of all, a complex web of events and activities happening at the end of the nineteenth century and mainly in New England. Why did the first Japan Society get started in Boston? Whose idea was it? Why did they need such a thing? There was a whole set of issues surrounding Japan and America at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, when international relationships were changing dramatically. The world had seen Meiji Japan develop quickly out of feudalism, changing Japan from an isolated, agricultural society into a “modern” industrial and internationally engaged nation, catching up, building up—importing science and Western education, for example. Then the world saw Japan attempting to throw off the unequal treaties and establish itself as a fully independent nation-state, and a military power as well. There was clear evidence, too, that at the end of the nineteenth century the way Japanese people saw themselves was changing—Japan's role in the world was changing.

At that very same time, there was a “cluster” of Americans, particularly in New England, who had been to Japan (as teachers, or as businessmen and art collectors) and who had come back with an affection—even an obsession—for Japan. These people kept getting together with one another to talk about Japan.

And the media was involved. I have spent a lot of time this year looking at contemporary Boston newspapers, especially the *Boston Evening Transcript* for 1900, 1901, 1902, 1903, the years leading up to the establishment of the Japan Society, and I found an enormous amount of coverage of Japan. Part of the coverage was related directly to Japan's war with Russia in 1904–05, but it wasn't just war reporting. The papers included articles on the Japanese education system, what a Japanese home looked like, how a Japanese family behaved, a broad variety of cultural and social issues. . . . I don't think there has ever been such extensive coverage of Japan—not even during the post-World War II period.

Masalski: *And this fascination with Japan—was it at all similar to the fascination with Japan in the 1980s that many of our readers will remember?*

Grilli: Yes, it was a similar fascination, but it was more than that. A hundred years ago, the attitude of Americans toward Japan was changing. It was not only, “We can teach these ignorant people something,” but also, “We can learn from these people.” This was the time when Edward Sylvester Morse brought back the thousands of Japanese artifacts that are housed at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and at Harvard’s Peabody Museum. There was a sizeable population in the Boston area that was really tuned in to Japan. In fact, nearly all the American experts on Japan were in Boston or New England—at the Athenaeum, at Harvard and Amherst, or at one of the other universities. They had a real zeal for learning *from* Japan. The Japan Society was established out of the energy of that group of intellectuals. By the way, Christopher Benfey’s book, *The Great Wave: Gilded Age Misfits, Japanese Eccentrics, and the Opening of Old Japan*, is a splendid re-telling of much of this story.

So that was the beginning. The Boston Japan Society was launched in 1904 to foster dialogue and cultural exchanges with Japan, and today we’re celebrating its hundred-year history. But this centennial also offers an opportunity to look to the future. There’s a lot more that we should be doing and there are all sorts of things that have to happen in the relationship between America and Japan. Any anniversary with two zeroes is a major milestone. This is a good time to stop and take stock of where we are, where we’ve come from, and where we’re going.

Masalski: *And where are we? From where you sit today, Peter—as President of the Japan Society of Boston—how do you see the relationship between the two countries?*

Grilli: That’s a big question. Basically, I think the relationship is pretty good right now. It’s relatively stable. There aren’t any big conflicts, no huge trade conflicts, for example. And, although the North Korea situation is always threatening, there certainly aren’t any large wars going on in the Pacific or Asia—so the relationship is much healthier than it has been for most of our 150-year history. What I think is particularly wonderful about the relationship today is the range of contacts between Americans and Japanese of all ages. There are opportunities for contacts today that would not have been so easy earlier: scientists can meet with scientists, teachers can meet with teachers, kids can meet with kids, with much greater ease than earlier—and that’s good.

There is more to the picture, however. America is rather fickle about its international relations; Japan is no longer the “country of the week” or the “country of the month,” as it was a few decades ago. Americans today are less passionately interested in Japan as they were then. For one thing, Japan doesn’t threaten American manufacturing and commerce as it did in the 1970s and 1980s, so we don’t have to worry so much about Japan. I think it’s unfortunate that we’re so noticeably less interested in Japan in the absence of serious conflict. We should be more interested in Japan than we tend to be. There’s still a great deal about Japan that Americans need to know, to experience, to discover. I think we’re taking Japan for granted a bit right now, and I’m not happy about that. I’m also not happy about America’s excessive borrowing from Japan to offset our increasing budget deficits. Japan is financing America’s debt to an enormous degree and, though I’m not an economist, that seems to be a rather unhealthy aspect of our relationship.

And on the Japanese side, I’m not happy about the occasional outbursts of anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism. They originate

with Japanese people who are being much more chauvinistic than they should be. It adds up to nonsense. So not everything in the relationship is sweetness and light, but basically today it’s a pretty stable relationship.

Masalski: *You’ve mentioned stability a couple of times. Do you see stability as the bottom line for measuring the status of a country-to-country relationship today?*

Grilli: No, it’s more than that. I just wrote an article for *Look Japan* about my sense that today there’s not quite the intensity of personal relationships that may have existed in the past. I keep going back to my own childhood—my time growing up in Japan. Although I don’t expect everyone to have had that kind of experience, I can’t help but ask, “Why aren’t there the kinds of relationships I remember?” “Why isn’t the relationship between our countries as intense as it could be?”

The title of the article is something like “The Importance of Skinship.” “Skinship” is a rather odd Japanese word that sounds like English but doesn’t really exist in English. Its meaning is quite obvious. It’s a kind of rubbing up against one another—direct, personal, real, people-to-people kinds of things. Somehow that “skinship” seems less than a few years ago. I’d like to ratchet it up.

I may be wrong. Maybe among all the JET (The Japan Exchange and Teaching Program) kids out there there’s more going on than I’m aware of, but I don’t sense it so much anymore. Do you remember the “Ron-Yasu” thing? President Reagan and Prime Minister Nakasone were truly good friends. And out of that friendship, that “skinship,” all sorts of beneficial things flowed—on both sides of the Pacific. Unfortunately, Bush and Koizumi don’t have that kind of relationship, and there doesn’t seem on either side to be a hunger, a yearning, for the kind of personal relationship that was characteristic of an earlier time. And I wish there were.

What prompted my thinking about this subject was a luncheon with Japanese businessmen a few months ago. One of them, who has lived many years in this country, mentioned in passing that he hadn’t been invited to dinner in an American home in the last five years. When he brought up the subject, I thought, “Wait a minute, something’s wrong here.” And I said to him, “Well, have you invited any Americans to your home?” And he said, “Well, yes, I did in the beginning, but then I became president of the company here and I began to worry that if I invited certain American employees home, I’d be showing favoritism. So, no, I haven’t had any Americans to my home in a long time. We go out and play golf sometimes, but . . .”

And that set me thinking. There are far too many Japanese journalists, diplomats, businessmen, and others who don’t mix with Americans any more, except in professional situations. In all honesty, this is a bit worrisome. Something is missing in terms of forging personal relationships. Part of it is that kids and people in their twenties and thirties in Japan and the US now just aren’t that different from one another. They listen to the same music, they wear the same clothes, and they see the same movies . . . so they think they don’t have to seek one another out. But they’re *not* the same. There *are* differences. And the more Americans see Japanese doing the things of everyday life, the more Japanese see Americans doing the things of everyday life, the better we’ll understand one another.

Masalski: *So what do you think is missing?*

Grilli: I think the give-and-take that used to characterize personal

relationships seems greatly diminished. And it's a shame. Personal relationships are so valuable; we really should cherish them. All the government-to-government things continue to happen, all the institutions continue to have contacts with their counterparts, and that's fine—that's as it should be. But I really think there's no substitute for personal, people-to-people, relationships. We all should work harder at them.

I'm reminded of Ed Reischauer's last book, *My Life Between Japan and America* (Edwin O. Reischauer was Professor of History at Harvard and Ambassador to Japan during the Kennedy administration). When that book first came out in 1986, the Japan Society of New York had a publicity party for Reischauer, at which he spoke. At dinner following the lecture, he let his hair down a little, which led me to ask, "The book is wonderful, but I wonder, what did you leave out?" And that set him to talking. As he described it, the original manuscript was like a big tree, with the trunk being his biography and the branches being the various things he had done in his public life. Then, he went on to say, there were also smaller and smaller branches, and all these little twigs, which combined to make the manuscript too big and unwieldy to publish. The editors, he said, did a wonderful job of cutting it back—of trimming the small branches and the twigs, leaving just the trunk and the main branches.

So I spoke up again and said, "Tell us about those twigs." And Reischauer said that what he meant by the twigs were all the friendships he had had as a child, stories about the people he had met in his various unofficial capacities as a private person. He said that the publishers felt—and he had reluctantly agreed—that those stories were not critical to the central story of his life.

Now here was a man who, looking back over his enormously important public career, was resigned to putting into the book only those events related to his public career. But initially, he had wanted to include more of the personal events of his life. And I thought to myself, How sad! What we really need to know about are all the twigs—because they're what made him the great man he was. And it's that kind of personal element that I think is lacking in Japan-America relationships today. I think that going forward we need to work harder at encouraging such close inter-personal relationships between Japanese people and Americans.

Masalski: *Tell us about one experience in your history of relationships with Japanese people that illustrates what you're talking about.*

Grilli: What I'm going to tell you was a rather terrible experience—not a happy one—but one I often reflect on. And I'm going to tell it in flashbacks—starting toward the end and working backwards. In the mid-1970s, my wife Susan and I lived in New York, where we became quite friendly with one Japanese family in particular. The father was in the United Nations Secretariat, and his family included two sons who had spent several years in American schools. One son was very outgoing, gregarious, and easy to like. The story is not about him. His elder brother was much more withdrawn, and the story is about him. He must have then been in his late twenties or early thirties. It was always a challenge for me to deal with him because he was not friendly and always kept himself apart. He seemed to have a chip on his shoulder. For some reason, I was determined to bring this guy around—that whatever it took, I would do it. In time, I got a little beyond the chip on his shoulder, but still

he constantly reminded me that he disliked Americans and that going to American schools was the worst experience in his life.

Eventually the family moved back to Japan. But before they left this guy told me a story about his childhood that I'll never shake from my memory. He said that in 1948 or 1949, when he was a young boy in Tokyo, he used to watch school buses filled with "fat, blond, American kids go past my house on their way to the international school." And he said, "I hated them—I just hated them. I was hungry, hungry all the time, and those kids looked so well fed; they had a bus, and I had to walk; and it was cold, and I was miserable." Maybe he and I were drinking together, because he was really opening up, and I urged him to go on. One day, he said, as the buses were rolling past his house, one of the American kids threw out the bus window some gum that he had been chewing. He continued—I get all choked up when I talk about this—and said, "I was so hungry and I hadn't had any candy for years . . . I picked up that gum from the street and popped it into my mouth and chewed it." I don't remember whether he actually said it or not, but I could tell from the way he talked about it, that he had hated himself all those years for chewing that gum. After he had unburdened himself of this story, he and I began to get along better.

What brought this home to me was when I later returned to Tokyo and located the place where he had lived, I then realized I must have been on that bus. I'm sure of it, because during the Occupation my family lived for several years about four blocks from where he lived. I went back and forth to school on a school bus, and I know that it drove past his house. Now, I'm sure I was too well trained by my parents to ever throw chewing gum out the window of a bus, but hearing that story made me think about how important it is to remain sensitive to the experiences, often the hardships, of other people.

Growing up as a child in Japan I never thought much of people as "we" and "them"—Japanese and American. As a kid, I wasn't determined to build bridges between people . . . I was just doing it, instinctively. And that's the best way to build good relations between our two countries, through people-to-people contact.

Things like this are always in the back of my mind as I go about my work at the Japan Society of Boston. I suppose this sounds a bit Pollyanna-ish—but I want to try to give back some of what I absorbed as a child growing up in Japan. Throughout my life I've been deeply enriched by close personal relationships with many Japanese people of all walks of life, and I hope my work reflects this. I still can't quite believe I'm actually being paid to do the work I love so much!

Masalski: *Peter, it's been a pleasure talking with you. Thanks for sharing your thoughts on these topics—your recent award from the Japanese government, the centennial celebration of the Japan Society of Boston, and the current state of United States-Japan relations. And thanks, too, for producing several major films on Japan that are available to classroom teachers (and are listed on the following page). ■*

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MAJOR FILMS ON JAPAN BY PETER GRILLI

Shintō

Nature, Gods and Man in Japan (1978)

PRODUCED BY PETER GRILLI
DIRECTED BY DAVID WESTPHAL
CINEMATOGRAPHY BY DAVID WESTPHAL
WRITTEN BY PETER GRILLI AND CHRISTINE GUTH

A documentary film about the role of Shintō as the “national religion” of Japan and as a unifying element in Japanese history and culture. Produced for the Japan Society (NY) to accompany a major exhibition of Shintō art. Since 1978 it has remained valuable as a visual introduction to Japanese history and culture, and is frequently used in college and high-school courses on Japan.

Available on video from The Japan Society Inc. (333 East 47th Street, New York, NY 10017; 212-832-1155; <http://www.japansociety.org/>) and from many academic film libraries.

Dream Window

Reflections on the Japanese Garden (1993)

DIRECTED BY JOHN JUNKERMAN
WRITTEN AND CO-PRODUCED BY PETER GRILLI
CINEMATOGRAPHY BY FOSTER WILEY
INTERVIEWS BY PETER GRILLI
MUSIC BY TORU TAKEMITSU

A beautiful, award-winning film about Japanese gardens as sanctuaries of repose, reflection, and fine landscape design—and as concentrated examples of many important principles of Japanese spirituality and aesthetics. A highlight of the film is interviews with many distinguished Japanese artistic figures (writers, artists, composers, architects, designers, etc.) who have found inspiration for their work in Japanese gardens.

Available on video from the Freer Gallery Bookstore (Sackler Museum/Freer Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, PO Box 37012, Washington, DC 20013-7012; 202-633-4880; <http://www.asia.si.edu/>).

Music for the Movies

Toru Takemitsu (1994)

DIRECTED BY CHARLOTTE ZWERIN
CO-PRODUCED BY PETER GRILLI AND MARGARET SMILOW
CINEMATOGRAPHY BY TOYOMICHI KURITA
INTERVIEWS BY PETER GRILLI

A documentary portrait of the distinguished Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu (1930–96) as a composer for films. In addition to being a superb composer, Takemitsu was also one of Japan’s leading intellectuals and one of the most creative artists of the postwar period. He composed music for ninety-five theatrical films, many of them the most acclaimed masterpieces of Japanese cinema, including *Woman in The Dunes*, *Ran*, *Dodes'kaden*, *Kwaidan*, *Hara-Kiri*, *Empire of Passion*, *Face of Another*, *Rikyu*, and many others. Highlights of this film are the long interview with Takemitsu and interviews with many of the great film directors with whom he collaborated, including Nagisa Oshima, Hiroshi Teshigahara, Masahiro Shinoda, Masaaki Kobayashi, and others.

Available from SONY-Classics (New York) and online via Amazon and other video sources.

Kurosawa (2001)

An international television co-production of BBC, PBS, and WNET for the PBS series *Great Performances*.

DIRECTED BY ADAM LOW
CO-PRODUCED BY MARGARET SMILOW AND PETER GRILLI
INTERVIEWS BY PETER GRILLI

This two-hour documentary television biography of the great Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa was a major special for PBS’ *Great Performances*, and was broadcast nationally in the US in March 2001.

The film includes long excerpts from many of Kurosawa’s masterpieces, as well as interviews with many Japanese directors and artists who worked with Kurosawa throughout his highly productive career as one of the world’s most acclaimed film directors.

Available from PBS (Washington, DC) and also available online via Amazon and other video sources.