Some Phases of Japanese Art

Leon Mead

WHEN in doubt how to begin his narrative, the novelist often refers to the weather. Tragedy and grim human nature are so traditionally allied to bad weather that such accessories as thunder, lightning, moaning wind, et cetera, are made to emphasize the darker deeds of life. The crimes of the stage villain are often attended by very violent weather indeed; for the playwright knows the value of such uncanny adjuncts as a shrieking tempest and that, when properly employed, they aid him in impressing the spectator. Critics are constantly dwelling on the atmosphere in fiction, though not always on the merely physical kind.

Outside of fiction, the weather plays an infinite role. The landscape or marine painter cannot produce a work that does not represent some kind of weather. If it be an autumn scene, the questions arise (and possibly a little thoughtful study of the picture itself will furnish the answers) in what clime, in what month of the autumn, and in what definite locality? In short, a hundred artists each might paint a picture entitled “A Storm at Sea,” no one of which would minutely resemble another, and yet all might be essentially true. Each artist would draw upon his fancy, his experience or acquired knowledge and represent some conception or remembered phases of the ocean during the progress of a storm. Marcus B. Huish, in his admirable book, Japan and its Art, says: “If there is one thing more than another in which Japanese artists excel, it is in the portrayal of wind, whether it be the soft breeze fluttering through the bamboo canes, or the furious typhoon raging through the trees and making everything quiver with its force.”

Now in estimating Japanese art we must take into consideration not only questions of atmosphere, and the physical features of the country itself, but those of heredity, racial characteristics, religion, and the customs of the people. It also should be borne in mind that the Japanese obtained their knowledge of the graphic arts, as nearly everything else, from the Chinese. Some of these, of course, were more or less modified to suit the genius of the people. Shintoism, not in Japan itself a ritualistic religion, but the oldest established
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sacred cult in Japan, was so deep-rooted that it simply absorbed the doctrines of Confucius when they were introduced, in the third century. When, however, Buddhism found its way into the country, in the seventh century, conditions began to change. Here was a religion that took hold of the Japanese imagination, appealed to the love of pomp and display among the people. Of Buddhism, Huish remarks: "It bears a strong resemblance to Roman Catholicism, with its army of saints, its love of decoration, incense, vestments, professions, celibacy, fasting, and legends." It gave an impetus to native art which aforetime had been sluggish and vague. Followers of the Shinto faith inherit a sense of what Mr. Osman Edwards calls *dutiolatry*, and the reverence of ancestors and their tombs amounts to a species of fanaticism; but they do not worship graven images, like the Buddhists. Their temples are austerely simple, as they are taught to be in their lives. *Per contra*, the old Buddhist temples and shrines were marvels of magnificence. No jewels were too costly for their altars, no decorations or carvings or mosaics too elaborate for their pretensions. Hence, for centuries there was a strenuous rivalry among artists to cater to Buddhist needs and ideals, with the result that Japanese art at this period was strongly tinctured with a purely pagan influence.

The modern period of Japanese art begins with Nobunaga, at about 1542. Under the sway of his successor, Hideyoshi, a code of rules was formulated for the observance of the *cha-no-yu*, or tea ceremony; and an association was founded, whose members were, as Mr. W. Anderson puts it, "the critics and connoisseurs, whose dicta consecrated or condemned the labors of artist or author, and established canons of taste, to which all works to be successful in their generation, must conform." Originating seven hundred years ago, according to Professor Chamberlain, the *cha-no-yu* has not only fixed Japanese etiquette but esthetics. It is only within the last hundred years that Japanese artists could indulge in free-hand drawing, without ruining their chances of a career. Formerly, if they did not follow the rules laid down in mouldy manuals by ancient authority, they were censured and their works banned. The employment of subjects relating to Buddhist gods and mythic
heroes served not only to perpetuate them in the minds of the people, but to keep alive the fervor of their religion. There are too many of these *tengu* (gods) to catalogue here, but I may be permitted to name some of the more important ones—those most often depicted by native artists. Some of them were really secular divinities, so to speak, that were accepted by Buddhist priests and teachers, who wished to avoid conflict and controversy as much as possible, their policy being not literally to fight their way to supremacy, as some of the Western creeds have done, but to make concessions wherever temporal advantage would accrue to them. *Daikoku* is the god of riches; *Hotei*, the spirit of goodness and kindness; *Jurojin*, the serene old god of longevity—usually represented with a white beard, mitred cap, and staff; *Tukurokujuin*, the lord of popularity and wisdom; *Ebisu*, the god of plenty, chiefly of products of the sea; black-faced *Bishamon*, the god of war and force, holding his lance and miniature pagoda; *Hachiman* is another, a lesser god of war. *Benten Sama*, goddess of grace and beauty, is sometimes portrayed as playing the lute; again she is pictured as the Lady of Mercy, with an hundred hands—the better to alleviate pain and abate wrong in the world. Occasionally you see how much more humanistic is the Japanese than the Greek and Roman mythology—as in the example of *Benten Sama*. The terrible god of the winds is *Kazé-no-kami* or *Futen*. Like some of the wind gods of the Greeks, he is represented with a bag of wind on his shoulders. *Susano* (*Godzu Tenno*) is god of the tides; *Kagutsuchi*, the god of fire; *Ama-terasu*, the beautiful goddess of the sun, sister of *Susano*, with whom she had a quarrel which led to her hiding in a cave. The dancing goddess, *Okamé* or *Uzumé*, by her witching *divertissement* before the mouth of the cavern, lured the goddess out of her solitary confinement. A perfectly burnished circular steel mirror in which she saw her beauty still untouched by time or sorrow, also served to reconcile her to the world again. This pretty legend is told in more detail by several writers, including Griffith. In Ise are temples to the Sun-Goddess, which are visited by many devout pilgrims every year. *Ukemochi-no-Kami*, or *Toyoké-hime* is goddess of Plenteous Food or
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of Earth; and Inari Sama is the rice god. Jizo, the patron of travelers, the protector of pregnant women, and friend of children, is naturally a popular deity—and so on. Some sixteen hybrid personages termed Rakan or Arhats were often depicted; also, the Rishis or Sennins, who were neither spirits, genii nor divinities, but with something of the supernatural about them. Then there were the Seven Gods of Good Fortune, and mythic animals and folklore, which figure again and again in Japanese art. I might also mention the frequent celebration of the varied prowess of the half brothers, Yoshitsumé and Yoritomo, who lived in the twelfth century. With such a pantheon of fabled worthies, it will be seen how fecund this class of art became in the course of time.

But a revolution in public taste was brought about in the eighteenth century. Hokusai was one of its supreme masters and his most notable competitor perhaps was Sosen, the famous monkey painter. In one of his last letters Hokusai wrote: “If it be possible to carve or paint in the other world, I shall not fail to do so where no one becomes old.” This bit of unconscious humor, written when he was eighty-nine years old, expresses the aspiration, the eternal longing of all men who consecrate their lives to art. Hokusai was not fully satisfied with his work, highly as it was admired by others. He wanted to live long enough to achieve a masterpiece which he himself could feel was without a flaw. But this was not to be—he died in 1849. The most prolific book illustrator and engraver of his time and race, he left One Hundred Views of Fuji, and scores of clever sketches and paintings, many of which are now in Paris, London and New York. He was all the rage in feudal Yedo, where his New Year’s cards, each with a unique cartoon or bit of landscape, were eagerly bought and kept as family heirlooms. It was Hokusai who first broke away from the old methods of drawing on a surface ruled off in squares; it was he who did so much to emancipate the art of his country from austere conventions. Like most of his people, he had a keen sense of the ridiculous, and in much of his work he let his humorous fancy have full play. He was not afraid to poke fun at the august gods themselves, making them comically hideous and giving them the most absurd postures.
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and grimaces. In this way he relieved superstition of some of its terrors, and soon many artistic imitators ventured into similar modes of caricature of these sacred themes. The Japanese formerly were not wont to regard painting as a distinct vocation by itself, but as a branch of decorative art. Some writers, however, have divided Japanese painting into five schools, representing different periods, from the sixth century. The Shinto, or Naturalistic, was founded by Okio, and dates from the middle of the eighteenth century. Okio copied nature with graceful realism, using washes and quiet tones and outlines in preference to strong body colors and sharp edges. Among the most noted of this school were Sosen, Hōyen, Gantai, Yosai, Zeshin, Ganku, Ippo, Yusei and Kuburo. One authority (Huish, that whom there is no better) asserts that the paintings of the old Japanese masters which now command the highest prices, are those of Kasan, Hoitsu, Chiuzan, Buncho, Tanyu, Tsunenobu, Yosai and Zeshin. Many other artists of the old schools, including bronze workers, carvers in wood, ivory and stone, enamellists, lacquerers, and engravers in metals, occur to me, but mention of them would scarcely illuminate the subject without going into details of their individual work.

But special attention belongs to the genius of Kyosai, who died some twelve years ago. Mrs. Hugh Fraser, in her delightful Letters from Japan, states that Kyosai at nine “captured the severed head of a drowned man from a swollen river, and brought it home to study in secret, as any other child would treasure a toy or a sweetmeat. The horror was discovered by his family, and he was ordered to take the grisly thing back to the stream and throw it in. Reluctantly the little boy trudged back to the river bank, the poor head in his arms; but before he threw it away, he spent long hours, sitting on the ground, copying every line of the awful countenance.” Other curious stories are told of his early passion for drawing and of the many ways in which he justified his later reputation as one of the greatest artists Japan has produced.

To-day Japan has art schools of her own. She no longer has to send promising students to the academic, realistic and impressionist schools in Europe. Many, however, go on their own account.
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But there is a conservative faction in Japan which would keep her art in the old grooves and not assimilate foreign methods and principles. It sturdily contends against the progressive coterie who wish to abandon entirely the old calligraphic system, the brush held at arms-length, and to adopt foreign colors, canvas, pencils, brushes and paraphernalia. Foreign influence has created a new school of Japanese art, in which such men as Yeto have been received with considerable favor in England and the United States. There is room, if not a need, for these two schools. Certainly for many years to come, purely native art will not cease to flourish. And in the meantime, we who attempt to judge it from an impartial point of view, should remember the sweeping contrasts between Japan’s civilization and our own.

By giving a brief running account of certain every-day customs and usages in Japan, the contrasts will be obvious enough. For instance: fatness is admired in Japan; weddings are celebrated at night; the husband and wife do not eat together, as a rule; kissing and shaking hands are practically unknown. A wave of the right-hand palm downward is their mode of flirtation. I have seen, by the way, an old Irish woman, who wished to be coquettish, make a similar gesture and say, “Och! go long wid yez!” Japanese carpenters pull the plane towards them; the threads of their screws turn to the left; their keys turn inward; small children are strapped on the backs of larger ones and so carried about; the Japanese sit down before distinguished men, in token of respect; they remove their shoes when they enter a house; their books begin at the right, and their footnotes are placed at the top of the page; they write vertically down a sheet of paper; their color for mourning is white; the best rooms in their houses are in the rear; they mount their horses from the right; they back a horse in a stall and hitch him in the front—and so these opposite ways of doing things might be continued to a sizable volume’s length. Another detail of difference, with which we are more immediately concerned here, lies in the fact that Japanese artists shade downward, while we shade upward. Now, does it stand to reason that, if in nearly everything their processes are antipodal to our own, they should
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produce the same kind of paintings we admire? Certainly not. And at this point, it may be frankly admitted that the adoption by the Japanese ladies of European dress has not improved their shapeliness. They appear to better advantage in their natural garb—the charming kimono. Western toilettes give them a dowdy, bizarre, slatternly appearance, in most cases; and I am inclined to believe that, sooner or later, there will be a revival of their former dress among Japanese women.

Occasionally you see in the modern pictures of Japanese artists a wonderful piece of perspective. But their ideas of proportion and ours are quite at variance. They do not go in for classic Greek symmetry. As I have said, occidental influences are betrayed here and there, though certainly not in dry point etching; for nearly all we know about that we have learned from the Japanese. In the use of colors they sometimes seem to violate the semblance of nature, yet seldom fail in being effective and artistic. In not following the tenets of conventional painters of the West, they have the authority of no less a master colorist than Turner, whom Ruskin ranked above all other English handlers of the brush; for Turner did not always copy the tints of nature as they appear to the average human eye.

Professor Chamberlain says: “In the days before Japanese art became known to Europe, people then used to consider it essential to have the patterns on plates, cushions, and etc., arranged with geometrical accuracy. If on the right hand there was a Cupid looking to the left, then on the left there must be a Cupid of exactly the same size looking to the right, and the chief feature of the design was invariably in the exact center. The Japanese artisan-artists have shown us that this mechanical symmetry does not make for beauty. They have taught us the charm of irregularity, and if the world owe them but this one lesson, Japan may yet be proud of what she has accomplished.”

It has been pointed out by several writers, among them Mr. Henry T. Finck, that the Japanese have produced no great examples in the nude. For centuries they have ignored their countless opportunities to study, for artistic uses, the nude in all its unconscious grace
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and beauty. They exploit, with rare skill, Fujiyama, Nikko shrines and scenery, storks, dragons, fishes (some of our American artists, who have been in Japan, say that the native painters portray the finny tribes better than all else), birds, flowers, etc., but leave the art of the nude to the Western nations. Their position in this matter is not very strange, when we apply our own common sense to it. Several reasons account for the fact that Japanese of the rank and file used to have no scruples about being seen in a nude or a semi-nude state. One was the excessive heat in summer, which made garments an additional discomfort. Within the last few years, we have seen in this country a sensible effort on the part of shirt-waist men to keep cool in sweltering weather, when perspiration, lassitude, and nervous ennui have it all their own way. Now, these little people of Hondo were as unconscious of evil in the exposure of their person as the primitive savage. They were as free from incontinent thoughts in thus seeing each other as the clean-minded animals of the forest. But to them the décolletée gown and the scanty bathing suit of the foreigner seemed suggestive and vulgar, and do still among many of them. To paint a nude woman would seem to a Japanese artist a sacrilege—not to the woman—but to his vocation; to his mind, it would be pandering to sensuous passion, and can it be doubted that such is the effect of art in the nude on many weak and salacious minds? Another thing: he has been taught by his religion that the human body is a vile carcass of no worth, a frail and corrupt mass, which is only destined to rot and waste away. Why then should it be glorified? he argues.

Lafcadio Hearn says that old Japan made morality instinctive. However that may have been, the female peasant, stripped to the waist, may look up from her daily drudgery and justly say, in effect, to the leering tourist, honi soit qui mal y pense. But suppose she were beautiful and equally free to show her charms as a model for money? Then, by all the traditions of her country, she would be committing a crime and disgracing herself. But in the rice fields or the tea fields, with no more on than Mother Eve herself wore, the Japanese woman could be and still can be as innocent morally as a
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young fawn. What we call indecency is to her a simple matter of convenience and relief from the discomforts of a very high temperature. More than a generation ago, when he was the English ambassador to Japan, Sir Rutherford Alcock said: "Where there is no sense of immodesty, no consciousness of wrong-doing, there is, or may be, a like absence of depraved feeling."

The historian Black also remarks, anent those working people who went abroad with only a loin cloth: "No Japanese ever saw any impropriety in it until we pointed it out to them. And they altered it to please us." Miss Bacon has argued the case very cogently, in the following words: "According to the Japanese standard, any exposure of the person that is merely incidental to health, cleanliness, or convenience, in doing necessary work, is perfectly modest and allowable; but an exposure, no matter how slight, that is simply for show, is in the highest degree indelicate." Nudity then in its practical relations to bathing, working, health and convenience is a matter of absolute indifference to them.

Satan has helped the highly civilized man to spur his jaded nature by suggestion—the low-cut gown, the bare voluptuous arm, the skirt dance and many other saltatorial performances which aim to tempt man across the border of his own self-respect. But there is nothing sirenic in the géisha dances; they are quite innocuous; and those who look for Carmencitas among the géishas of Japan are doomed to disappointment. They will come back home saying that the No dances are stupid, and the Kiogen anything but comic. The Japanese have a quick apprehension of the dramatic in their renderings of life. Like children, they love to make believe and pretend things. But they also have a dominant sense of the ridiculous, which the popular artists cultivate. Hence they are no more successful as portrait painters than as painters of the nude.

To give a faithful representation of the human face divine, according to our canons, is not an impossibility to them, but is outside of their métier and temperament. Indeed they have not done the women of their race justice on canvas; and I quite agree with Herr Rein that "in reality, the female sex is more beautiful than the ideal of their native artists." The Japanese artist will see to it that his
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ladies have long noses; for it is a notion among the race that to possess a long nose is aristocratic—a badge of good blood and high birth. In this respect, they envy Caucasians—their own noses usually being short and stubby.

We have learned not to look for photographic or mechanical accuracy in the best portraits. What we expect in them is some glimpse of the sitter’s soul, some revelation of the real character, as interpreted by the clairvoyant genius of the artist. Now the Japanese go into psychology in their work with the brush, but it is the psychology of action, violence; in other words, it is dramatic. They are among the original symbolists, I fancy. They give us stories, legends, parables and apologues in color—rich in hints of creative power, though to a Whistler or a Sargent out of drawing and hopelessly commonplace in composition. In the words of Sir Edwin Arnold, “the people have the nature rather of birds or butterflies than of ordinary human beings.”

Is it because they are not altogether spoiled by the sham refinements of modern society, because they are closer to the primal heart of life, that fauna of all kinds from mice to whales are so well depicted by them? And so definitive is the work of the masters that they have no noteworthy successors. The proverb, of Chinese origin, “there is no seed to a great man,” Doctor Griffis says has been exemplified time and again in the history of Japan. One exception is Danjiro, the great actor, who is the seventh, some erroneously say the eighth, of that name and profession in succession.

As miniaturists, ivory-carvers, and in very delicate work the Japanese have shown the most exquisite skill. They have thoroughly imbibed the Chinese love of figures and precision. Even to-day a finely-executed piece of calligraphy is valued higher by them than only a fairly good painting. Here the mathematical nicety of the Japanese mind asserts itself. A perfect specimen of an engraved signature of a famous man, on metal-work, lacquer or porcelain, has to them the merit which we attach to a supremely wrought canvas. But more and more they are studying and translating nature. Look at their paintings on tapestry and silk, lacquer and fine earthenware; their marvelous embroideries, their mosaic
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triumphs in *cloisonné*, their handling of colored illustrations in *éditions de luxe!*

It is not to be denied that Walt Whitman could have written his lines in rhyme, had he so wished and willed; but think how much strength of expression would have been lost, how much individuality! So the Japanese artist could draw as accurately as we, were he to receive the kind of training Americans and Europeans have; but what would he lose? His work would not glow with those drastic personal touches; in short, he would be like ten thousand other men whose superb talents are warped and shackled by rules and the cant of the schools. But then if he is strong enough, he will be independent in striking out for himself and producing something in genre or impressionist work intrinsically worthy of warm praise.

In glyptic art the Japanese have reached more harmony and correctness than in painting and in managing *chiaroscuro* effects. Mr. Theodore Wores pronounces the anatomy of some of their sculpture to be quite beyond criticism. Xylography among them has made great strides. The range of subjects of contemporary Japanese art is very wide, including every conceivable phase of their life. For instance, they paint the *Hina Matsura*, or Feast of Dolls, the little girls' gala time, during the first week of March. The corresponding holiday for the small boys is on the fifth of May. It is made symbolic with heroic toys—to inspire in the youth courage and patriotism. The sign of this festival is a tall pole surmounted with an open basket-work ball from which hang cloth or paper effigies (very natural they look, too) of *nobori* or carp, one of the strongest fish—famous for its ability to stem swift currents, to mount waterfalls and to attain a great age. Variations of this sign are extended sometimes to a school of flying carp on a group of poles on which the fishes are so arranged that their fins wag and give them a motion as of swimming.

Almost countless are the subjects of the Japanese brush: pedlars, jugglers, professional story tellers, scenes from popular plays, monsters of the deep, goblins, demons, flower fêtes, lotus ponds, pergolas of wistaria, patches of iris, tea house dinners, jinrikishas, coolies,
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boating parties, geishas, priests, blind shampooers, peasants, artisans, family life, and so on ad finem. What native art is capable of becoming under Western influences it is scarcely safe to predict. There are many who believe the national spirit will keep Japanese art from falling into mongrelism. And in that view the writer is quite willing to share.

[The explanations made by Mr. Mead regarding the pictures accompanying his article are so full of interest that it has been thought best here to give them in full. The figures used refer to the plates which will be found among the illustrations printed in the fore part of the present number of The Craftsman.

—EDITOR’S NOTE.]

No. 1: Interior of the Kiyomidzu Temple, built on a hill overlooking Kyoto. One side is supported by trestle-work, about sixty feet in height. Formerly, despairing lovers were wont to hurl themselves over the railing. But when several tragic deaths had occurred, the Government wisely placed a large net beneath the spot, in which to receive the falling bodies, and, thereafter, no more suicides were attempted. The sacred and votive paintings seen upon the walls were presented by famous native artists and are now old and warped. They are further disfigured by balls of chewed paper which are thrown on them by fanatical pilgrims. In the room beyond the door, on the left, are many bronze and wooden idols, and stationed there, also, are several priests who sell fortunes on printed slips, by a method that is really a game of chance.

No. 2: Assembly room in the Hongwanji Temple, Kyoto. Painting, carving and gilding are its chief artistic features. The floor is covered with tatami: that is, straw mats, three by six feet in dimension and bound neatly with a wide, dark blue braid. The pictures were executed by celebrated artists of the country.

No. 3: Bronze bell at the entrance of a Shinto temple at Nikko. It may be rung by any visitor who will pay a small fee to the attendant priest, and it is supposed to call the attention of the gods to the prayers offered by the ringer.