JAPANESE COLOR PRINTS AND SOME OF THEIR MAKERS

M. LOUISE STOWELL

In order to understand the art of a people, it is necessary that the people themselves should be understood, not only from a geographical and political standpoint, but in those higher aspects which arise from their religious and aesthetic ancestry.

In the art of the Japanese, a just appreciation of it is impossible without understanding the various factors which have combined to make this, in many respects, one of the most remarkable peoples in all history.

It is essential that we should become familiar with the nature of the Shinto teachings in order that we may comprehend the all-pervading spirit of reverence that we find in the higher types of Japanese art. It is equally essential in our appreciation of the mystic quality in that same art, that we should be acquainted with the infiltration of Buddhist teachings, from China through the Korean peninsula, to Japan. The insular character of the people must also be given great weight in the causes which have produced their art,—a cause which is to be given equal prominence with their climatic environment, which in many respects bears a curious resemblance to that of the British Isles.

Also in the study of this art, must be taken into consideration the racial characteristics of its producers; having their origin as they did in the Malay peninsula, and not from the North and West, as commonly supposed. They have retained that sense of *finesse*, diplomacy and deportment which seems to be one of the inherent characteristics of the Malay race and its descendants. A consideration of these various factors shows us that the Japanese must, with his Shinto tendencies, reverence his ancestors and delight in the worship of heroes. From his Buddhist teaching, he has an almost sensuous delight in all manner of elusive mysticisms. The supernal to him is not terrible, but familiar. At his nurse’s knee the rhymes of our Mother Goose are supplanted by legends from the Buddhist mythology, and as he grows older, it is not the ring of the Nibelungen, but the tale of the forty-seven Ronins that inflames his boyish mind.

In his childish excursions into the country, which is circumscribed in area, every material feature has its piquant tale, the hills and forests their gods and goddesses, and the streams their nymphs, while every cloud-form reveals a deity.

With this early instruction, it is but logical that every phase of nature should be to him simply a convention which stands for a legend and is ever associated in his mind with that particular tradition. This quality of mind makes him a devout worshipper of nature, not nature *per se*, but
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nature as the connecting link with that mystic world of which he learned from his mother’s lips: in this being analogous to the old Greek who saw the nymph in every spring and the dryad in every tree. As a direct issue from his keenly sensitive mind and the tact and diplomacy inherited from his Malacca ancestry, an almost infallible sense of proportion is common to him and a false quantity of space or illy-opposed lines are as grievous to his aesthetic sense as would be a discord to the sensitive ear of a musician. If, then, we set aside the unique costumes, the unfamiliar architecture, and novel landscape contours, and bear in mind the trend of the Japanese intellect, we find an art that is not only not strange, but which is intensely real, vital, impressionistic, if you chose, but nevertheless, the most synthetic and fundamental known to historic times. This art displays a respect for organic form, while not hesitating to sacrifice this for the higher qualities of gracious line, well-disposed space and beautiful color which may be in separate patches and at variance with Occidental notions of artistic veracity, yet having as a whole an authoritativeness and finality which stamp it as one of the world’s greatest arts. It is only necessary, in substantiation of this last statement to establish an intimacy with some of the greatest modern French and Englishmen. If, in making a critical estimate of Puvis de Chavannes, Turner, Rossetti, and Sir Edward Burne-Jones, instead of hunting for minor defects, as the imperfect drawing of a buckle and the exact color of an unimportant tree trunk, we approach them as a whole and take into consideration the concession to chiaroscuro, which, unfortunately for great art, has been so strongly insisted upon since the time of Leonardo da Vinci, we find different motifs treated in precisely the same way, and so strong is the relationship between the two that Turner and Hiroshige might have changed environments without detriment to the arts of their respective countries.

Jules Breton and Utamaro are kindred spirits, and in Puvis de Chavannes is to be found the same grasp of composition and subtle massing of dark and light that obtain in the fertile Sesshu.

It is not to be understood that the Japanese artist is unfamiliar with chiaroscuro, perspective, or in fact, any of the illusive expedients of the Western painters, but realizing, as he does, that an exact transcript of nature is to a certain extent analogous to that form of music which renders the crowing of cocks and the squealing of swine, he has not deemed it the all in all.

For many years the Shoguns or military hierarchy had their court painters, who worked exclusively for them and their friends of the aristocracy, until the common people of Japan became self-conscious through the frequent visits of the Dutch and Portuguese and demanded an art of their own. This, of course, could not be satisfied by the expensive mural decorations and expensive kakemono on silk, for the obvious reason of the cost of production.

Hence the evolution of the so-called broadsides and single-sheet color prints. The latter contain a subject on one sheet, and the broadsides have the subject spread over two or more sheets which, when placed together in their proper relations, produce a complete composition or picture. These prints, while being generally in effect col-
ored wood-cuts, are yet so inherently different, not only in manufacture, but in result, that a rudimentary analysis of the operation is not amiss at this point. The wood usually employed is a variety of cherry, the texture of which must be hard. The wood is first cut into planks, and these are planed until they are perfectly level and smooth, free from all traces of the plane and show some lustre on the surface. Both sides are finished alike. The tools employed are knives and chisels of the best quality. Written characters or pictures are then drawn upon a certain kind of Japanese paper, and the drawings thus made are pasted face down upon a prepared plank by means of starched paste. The plank is then ready for the engraver. This applies to prints in black only. For color printing, the outlines of the design are first cut and printed in black and the designer of the picture then marks on different sheets the parts to be colored. In Japanese wood-cutting, the direction of the knife is almost identical with that of the brush, and wood-cuts by skilful hands therefore show the exact features of the originals. The printing is done upon moist paper with water colors. Five colors are generally employed: black, white, red, yellow and blue, all mixed with the necessary quantity of water; and the various hues, shades and tints are obtained by mixing the pigments together. There is no particular method of producing
Haranobu
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these colors. The result depends entirely upon the experience of the printer, who mixes either in color-dishes or upon the blocks themselves. The printer places his block upon the table before him, lays on the required color with a brush, puts a sheet of paper down upon a plank and lightly rubs it with the baren, which is a small, hard shield, consisting of a stiff disc covered with layers of paper pasted together and turned up on the edge, and covered with cotton cloth on the outside.

A second disc fits into this shallow receptacle and is held in place by a bamboo sheath drawn tightly over it and twisted together to form a handle. This rubbing with the baren is repeated upon a number of sheets of paper. The printer then takes up another plank, makes a second impression upon the sheets bearing the first one, and this is followed by a third, fourth, etc., until the printing is completed. Rice paste is sprinkled over the pigment upon the block and the brush is also soaked with this paste to increase the brilliancy of the colors and to fix them more completely. As each color requires a separate cut, each plank must have certain fixed marks, so that all the sheets may be laid down in exactly the same position to ensure the fitting of each color upon the others. The Japanese printer depends here simply upon his experience: the registering marks on the block consisting of a rectangular notch at the right and a straight mark at the left.

It is evident that the Japanese printer must be an accomplished artist to be able to produce with his brush the various hues and shades, precisely as a water-color painter does. He can deposit more or less pigment on the block, according as he needs a stronger or more delicate tint, and can also produce gradations on a flat block. To produce a graduated sky, the Japanese engraver gives the printer a flat block on which merely those parts are cut away which correspond to objects seen against the sky, such as trees, mountains, houses, etc., and which must be kept free from the blue sky behind them. On this block, the printer stamps the gradations needed, and if he cannot get a satisfactory result with one printing, he uses the same block twice. A block may be printed in a flat tint the first time and then charged a second time with another color gradation and printed on top of the first to produce modulations. The same block may be printed with different colors in different parts. As many as one hundred and twenty impressions or printings have been known. In modern times when the Japanese needs secondary or tertiary colors, these are printed by themselves, though in the old prints the printing of the primaries over one another to produce the secondaries occurs.

The wooden blocks naturally soon lose their keen edge, and in first editions the printer works under the direct supervision of the artist, or varies the color composition to please his own fancy.

The later editions are printed more carelessly and cheaply. Good specimens of the work of the great artists may be yet procured, but are growing rarer and increasing in value every year.

In the earlier period of Japanese art, classic standards prevailed, but about the year 1680 occurred the breaking away from old traditions. Numerous schools and styles were established.

A well-known one of these was headed by
Toyokuni
Korin, who set aside the rules of formalism and may be described as an ultra-impressionist, but still one who was imbued with classic feeling. The Kano and Tosa schools held sway for a time. Okio, whose animals and birds are now eagerly sought by collectors, flourished during the seventeenth century, but the distinctive school of the entire period is that of Ukiyo, “The painting of the floating world,” which rejects all ideal standards and mirrors the passing fashions and ordinary recreations of the people by means of the color prints just described. These prints, which pictured social and domestic life in the large cities, were sent to the more remote towns, and in the same manner as we now preserve our favorite posters and book-plates, were eagerly treasured by the people for the delight of the connoisseur and collector of the present generation. This is the art of the common people, shaped by new lines of intellectual endeavor, namely: the great expansion of literary works, dramatization of historic events, the founding of theatres and the evolution of novels. Stimulated by these resources, the people began to express themselves, their novel sensations, their new activities. Yeddo during this period has been compared to Paris during the second empire.

Up to 1765 the art of printing had been confined to two colors with black, a green and a pale rose or beni. Haranobu greatly improved and refined the art of printing, by the introduction of a third block which permitted the use of olives, browns and grays. In consequence of this innovation, a wonderful succession of fine and subtile color passages were evolved during the next three years. There occurred a ripening of process, a more complete understanding of the possibilities of the color blocks. This was the flowering of the Ukiyo-e period. A season of fine line, delicacy of tint and broad color effects, was followed by a reaction from the high refinements of color; while clever but coarse rendering, careless drawing and cheap printing became prevalent. The leader in this descent was Utamaro, although the downward course was partly arrested for a time by the efforts of that galaxy of brilliant names, Hokusai, Hiroshige, Toyokuni, Yeisen, and Kuniyoshi, great masters, whose productions deserve the most careful attention.

Utamaro was born in 1754 and died in 1806. Extremely sensitive to line and color, he was illiterate and dissipated. He produced some landscapes, but his prints are principally portraits.

Toyokuni was born in 1768. He learned the art of color printing and distinguished himself by its application. He died in 1825, and is remembered by his portraits of actors and dramatic scenes, and his illustrations to novels. An artistic rivalry existed between him and Utamaro. If Toyokuni would put forth illustrations to a story, Utamaro would immediately attempt the same subject with a more ideal and romantic treatment. Where Toyokuni emphasizes the humanity of his creations, Utamaro poetizes and invests them with a refinement of idealism. Hokusai was born in 1760, and achieved his greatest results in color prints and illustrated books. Of marvelous versatility and remarkable genius, he seems never to have been aware of this power or his supreme capabilities, and we find him adopting different masters and not always those of the highest artistic
integrity—and swayed by the most opposing influences throughout his entire artistic career.

He had various manners, at times almost a fatal facility of dashing off his clever impressions, his middle period being much finer in artistic conception than either earlier or later. He broke from all art tradition and followed independent lines of creation. Many interesting anecdotes are related of him. Upon one occasion, his enemies, observing that he could produce nothing greater than the little book illustrations then in vogue, he confused them by drawing in public a head thirty-two feet high. On another occasion, he drew a paper horse as large as an elephant, and immediately followed this by the representation on a grain of rice of two sparrows in flight. The following passage is recorded of him: "From my sixth year I had a perfect mania for drawing everything I saw. When I reached my fiftieth year I had published a vast quantity of drawings; but I am dissatisfied with all that I produced before my seventieth year. At seventy-three I had some understanding of the power and real nature of birds, fish and plants. At eighty I hope to have made farther progress, and at ninety to have discovered the ultimate foundation of things.

"In my one hundredth year I shall rise to yet higher spheres unknown and in my one
Kunioshi
hundred and tenth, every stroke, every point, and in fact everything that comes from my hand will be alive. Written at the age of seventy-five, by me, Hokusai, the old man mad with drawing."

He changed his world, as the Japanese have it, at the age of eighty-nine, and is buried in the temple at Yeddo: his last utterance being the plaintive prayer that heaven would but grant him another five years to become a great artist. Yeisen, who flourished during that period, had an interesting and somewhat unusual personality. Born of cultured parents, he was filial, dutiful, and of notable success as both author and painter. The reputation of his color prints rests on his portraits of actors and beauties. He objected to becoming famous, and would abandon commissions from his publishers to devote himself to projects for toys, kites and designs behind which he could conceal his identity.

Dissipation claimed him time and again, and he at length retired to private life, saying that fortune, if tempted too long, might go as easily as it had come, and that it were better for him to discharge his patrons than that, by reason of old age or incapacity, they should see fit to discharge him. The date of birth of Hiroshigi, the great landscape painter of Japan, is somewhat of a mystery, owing to the existence of two or possibly three artists of his name who worked in the same vein. Not much that is authentic can be stated of his personality, but it seems certain that one of the Hiroshigi died about 1846. His convincing landscapes have, to quote Mr. Edward Strange, "all the simplicity of a master and every fault known to European canons of criticism."

One marvels ceaselessly at the breadth of his color passages, the taste which selects and combines these tones, the interdependence of which may be seen by covering with the hand some one of the many patches of color and noting how the whole design has lost something which can be obviated only by the restoration of the missing patch. In examination of these prints, even if we do not accept the convention, we are impressed by the fine dexterity of the artist and his intuitive knowledge of his craft. He attempts nothing beyond what can be rendered by lines and flat masses, and the prints are to be enjoyed as we enjoy a rug, for their physical beauty only; for the Japanese print does not attempt a moral, and seldom tells a tale, but in its abstract beauty is its own excuse for being. The law of art in Japan is manifestly the same as that law in Egypt, in France, in America, but one sees this law so absolutely obeyed in the production of the best Japanese art that one is apt to set down its application as universal in the latter country. There exist certain lines and shapes which are universally and inherently recognized as good.

The reason for their excellence must be sought in the foundations of the world and the construction of our nervous systems.

The combination of these elements in such wise that each shall enhance the other, while from this combination arises the single characteristic unit upon which all minor qualities depend, constitutes that upon which the production of a good picture rests.

The mode of combining these elements varies with the power of the individual—the greater the faculty of a wise selection
and rejection, the greater the technique. The composition of art form is identical, whether the creative impulse is expressed by means of sculpture, poetry, music, painting or architecture; each of these mediums having its special advantages as well as its limitations. Art is individual, science is coöperative. Proceeding with this distinction, art is synthetic, science is analytic.

As science is analytic, we can add to it, subtract from it, multiply it, or divide it. From art the synthetic, we can remove no element without agitating the equilibrium of the whole, since each element is sensitive to every other element.

Reducing to their simplest form these Japanese color prints, we arrive at the skeleton construction or line idea of the composition. We find lines and shapes inherently good, acting upon our emotions and giving us pleasure, because so combined by the skilful hand of the artist that a synthesis is produced in which each line is virile. The quality of the line should be considered. According to his temperament the Japanese so renders this, that it is bold, rugged, massive, or tender, delicate, poetic.

Observing next the dark and light elements of the print, we are delighted by the same skilful choice of masses of dark vibrating against masses of light. Be it said here that the Oriental has never considered the representation of cast shadows as a thing of serious importance. All impermanent manifestations of nature representing a mood, are discarded in his scheme. Thunder, lightning and the like phenomena, when occurring in the prints, are to be regarded as symbols and interpreted for their esoteric significance. Black and white is a principle to be studied for its own sake,
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a field of creation as important as line or color, while distinct from it. The third great element which arrests our attention is that of color, full, rich, free, or subdued, mellowed, tender, but always harmonious. The Japanese artist does not consider the independent colors of the objects with which he deals, but devotes his energies to the final result of his combinations; the various color patches undergoing modification by their juxtaposition, and the outcome being the value of the separate combinations, plus the value of the sum total of their combinations.

This is the true Japanese idea of a synthetic harmony as exemplified in these prints by Hokusai, Hiroshige, etc.—one in which no single element can be taken away without depriving the whole of its wonderful strength. If it were possible to alternate the art of the Japanese with the productions of the primitive Italians, in other words, the painters prior to the time of Raphael, it would be instructive to notice the striking similarity in the reverential way in which these two races uttered their messages: first, the quality of having something to say; and next, the direct, forceful and simple manner in which it is said. The absolute insistence upon every fact and detail which make the utterance clearer and the ruthless suppression and elimination of everything that tends to interfere with or obscure the intent of the artist. Also the same disregard for academic conventionalities, so often the refuge for the impotent, and in each a simplicity that almost leads the critic to exclaim, if it were not blasphemous, “Except ye become as little children, ye may not enter into the kingdom of art.” It is a fact as well established as the geological epochs of the world’s history, that we have first the longing to express by symbols the ideas teeming in the brain of man, next the sophistication in the practice of these symbols, followed by the period when the art of the craftsman assumes greater proportions than the idea to be expressed, again followed by the utter degeneracy and chaos of the art, which in time is succeeded by a period of artistic death only quickened by the desire again to say something. This evolution, which is common to all of the arts, and literature as well, has not in the history of the world hitherto been coincident in time: the one country seeming to have grasped the sacred fire when it was laid down in the artistic death throes of another. This, with sorrow be it said, is the case with the art now under consideration. Contact with the Western world having revealed to the Oriental artist new and untried possibilities of technique, he immediately strove as a matter of pride to emulate, if not outdo, the work of the foreign devils, with the result that in grasping for these novelties of technique, he relinquished the great and vital principles of his ancestors and too late discovered that, like Esau, he had bartered his birthright for a mess of distinctly inferior pottage. At the present time the more enlightened of the Japanese, including their wise Mikado, perceiving the disaster that has overtaken the national art, are trying to restore it to its former lofty position, but with only a questionable success, and it is much to be feared that not in our time or generation will again be seen the glory of line and color that blazed across the artistic firmament during the existence of the great “Painting of the Floating World,” the Ukioye of Japan.