JAPANESE BOOK ILLUSTRATIONS

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We should not judge Japanese pictures solely by our own canons. To understand what Japanese art means we should know something of the national spirit of the people, their temperament, their customs, their traditions; for their great painters and carvers and craftsmen have put all these and much more into their work. The history of Japan may be said to be perpetuated in her works of art; and among the latter may be classed de luxe books—made chiefly for rich foreigners, as the average native cannot afford them. Certain wealthy Japanese savants, however, have special books, with fine illustrations, made for their libraries.

They possess in Japan the skill and facilities to turn out exquisite vellum editions. Xylography has made giant strides there, and their color type printing, done by hand on crêpe paper, is rich and glowing in effect—almost like embossed enamels. The reproductions here presented of course give no idea of the brilliant color schemes of their originals, which as specimens of artistic illustration, however, do not belong to the highest class. They may serve to suggest the general merit of the works that are sold to foreigners as souvenir volumes at moderate prices. The de luxe editions have far more delicate tints and elaborate contrasts, not to say embellishments, and much decorative gold work, like some of the mediæval missals of Europe.

Many of these souvenir books are merely a series of pictures, without any text, except a few explanatory words in Japanese on the margins. They usually give a pictorial version of some popular old legend or celebrate the exploits of some Shinto god or historic hero. The Buddhist mythology is also often represented, but artists nowadays are leaving such lore alone; as Buddhism is under the ban of the government.

 Formerly, painting was not considered a vocation by itself in Japan, but a branch of decorative art. For this reason some of the foremost artists in the “Land of the Rising Sun” never attempted an ambitious subject on canvas, but painted birds and flowers on china and porcelain, or quaint designs on lacquer, or executed superb carvings on ivory. The artistic bent of others was exercised in the work of painting pictures on paper-lanterns, fans, parasols and screens, or in weaving gorgeous brocaded silks and priceless tapestries and mats.

About one hundred years ago such artists as Hōyen, Yusei and Hokusai began to break away from the trammels of the old schools and conventions, and to take up free-hand drawing. This was intended to be a popular art and of necessity economy was an important factor; therefore, the process of printing with color blocks was evolved. Four printings in the hands of an expert workman are all that is necessary to produce color combinations of the utmost subtlety and power. To the Occi-
dental mind the crudeness of the process is startling, and to those who are familiar with machine processes, possibly appalling.

Imagine an engraver with a piece of cherry plank, on the flat side of the same carving, with the utmost precision, lines only the trained skill of the printer as a means of register, are produced these prints which rank in the art world in the same plane with the etchings of Rembrandt.

Prior to Korin the art of the Japanese was essentially classic and a continuation

the most comprehensive that the art of the world has ever seen, with a Japanese jack-knife. This process includes what is known as the black or outline block, and others which carry the different colors to be printed each over the other. Then with the combination of the simplest possible colors mixed with a little rice paste, and of the conventions brought to their country by the Chinese, through the medium of their Buddhist Priests. It was characterized by extreme angularity of form, rigid conventions and symbolism of an involved and pronounced type. With the advent of Korin, who was the first master and greatest influence in the life and art of
Hokusai, came the response to a demand for a popular art; the old being done entirely at the request of Shogun and his noble associates.

The Ukieyo, or “Floating World,” had then its origin in Korin, from whom came an artistic descent of most illustrious mas-

gers. Among these may be mentioned: Hokusai, Toyokuni, Kunasada and Hiroshi, with whom color printing, as a great art, perished in the middle of the last century; there being at the present time strenuous but tentative efforts on the part of the Imperial Government to revive it.

Great art is in no sense psychologically narrow or insular. It is not impossible for Western artists to absorb the essence of Japanese art. Moreover, certain Japanese artists, such as Genjiro Geto, who have studied in this country and Europe, have shown a quick aptitude in acquiring the essential details of the three-chief schools of Occidental art. Many, too, have sought to combine the features that distinguish the best works of Japanese and of Western painters; but the results thus obtained are hybrid and promise no supreme achievements. The Japanese would better con-
fine themselves to their own style and not try to blend with it an exotic taste; or if they prefer Western ideals and methods, they would better follow them exclusively.

The range of Japanese subjects for the brush, for wash drawings, for dry point etchings, etc., is not wider than their treatment. In dramatic painting, amazing versatility is evinced. Human violence is one of their favorite themes. In painting wind storms—typhoons, as they are called in the Orient—the Japanese are not equalled by Western painters. To American eyes their portraits are little short of caricatures; for they exaggerate those features which they think make for beauty. For instance, they regard a long nose as aristocratic, a sign of high birth; hence they make long noses in their pictures, although, as everyone is aware, the people have short, stubby noses.

If you have studied at first hand the characteristics of the Japanese, you are better prepared to judge of their art. If you know that as a people they are imaginative, humorous, emotional, aesthetic, and very much like children, the motifs they introduce in their book illustrations and the expression of their thoughts and fancies in
color have for you a clearer and more serious significance. But even then, at times, from inability to command their point of view in art, we miss some of the suggestions of their symbolism.

Only the Japanese temperament can grasp the ethical or artistic purpose back of those pictures which to us seems merely bizarre and elusive in meaning. We laugh at their perspectives and their figures, which, according to our ideas, are out of drawing. But we must remember that the Japanese artist purposely avoids what we call Greek symmetry; that in the irregular line he makes his most effective appeal to the appreciation of his countrymen. He interprets life and nature, illustrates poems, legends and stories from a point of view into which enter a thousand convictions and actuations more or less opposed to our own; though in a final analysis these differences are found to be merely radiations which are traceable back to the same source. Only the eternal human soul is unresolvable.