THE EVOLUTION OF THE JAPANESE CARPENTER: BY L. L. JANES

If the tourist in Kyusyu, the southern island of Japan, will saunter anywhere inland through the suburbs of the historical old city of Kagoshima, he will observe ranges of caves here and there in the lava cliffs that hem in the city. To this day, these homes of the primitive cave-dwellers are habitually used for storage or as shelter for cattle or jinrikishas; while one, a troglodyte palace of two rooms dark enough to suit Pluto himself, has a wide local celebrity for having been selected by Saigo, the Japanese Catiline, as a last refuge from the pursuing government troops.

These caves, dug out of the soft, dry, friable rock with the shell scoop, stone drill and burnt sharp stick of the roving fisherman, who first touched at the southern shores of Kyusyu, were antecedent of everything that now goes by the name of architecture in Japan.

But numbers multiplied, and the fisherman's reed-thatched shelter soon became the model, intermediate between the cave and the hunter's hut. Memories of the wild rice and other indigenous grains of the mainland enticed to the rudiments of agriculture. Storage as well as shelter became imperative and a new burden was laid upon the primitive carpenter's invention. Architect, carpenter, and owner were united in one person and the walking delegate was not yet. The architect took his ideas from the groves—the live oak, cryptomeria, and the camphor laurel. The leafage of the forest suggests the first and only improvement that was ever made upon the fisherman's thatch, the modern tile differing in no essential principle from the over-lapping leaves that gave his earliest shelter from snow and rain to the belated hunter of the deer and wild boar.

At this stage, a carpenter's kit consisted of a sharpened stone mounted in a split stick, a fire-tempered cudgel for digging, a shell for scooping earth—and no chest to store them in when out of use until his own habitation was completed. His materials were poles, vines, and thatch pulled from the neighboring salt marsh.

Still population increased; and with every increment of insular progress, there were fresh demands for more varied accommodations. The new community was fenced off by intervening seas from the settled industries and abundant resources of the continent, and here we come upon the two crucial facts that underlie all the mystery there is in Japanese character, history, or crafts.
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They are the conditions involved in the resources available and the circumstances of the new environment. No one marvels much in our day at the stone and brick masonry of the treeless Nile valley with its bordering masses of matchless building stones which, in a manner, created the mason’s trade and built monuments to his skill and toil outlasting the chronicles of Cheops and Kephren. And who that commiserates the mud hovels of that land of mud and slime criticises them for the absence of wood and the presence of filth?

On the other hand, the cedars of Lebanon were neither numerous enough nor sufficiently accessible to satisfy the longings of the Israelite, then a denizen of tents, for a permanent abode. A king of Solomon’s wealth and wisdom could utilize them in sheltering and adorning the high altar of his people, as he also utilized the gold of Ophir, the gums of Arabia, and the gems and spices of India. But the rocky ridges of Palestine, with scarcely enough tree growth for fuel, constrained the genius of a great nation, forced it to be content with one temple, and weighted the domestic architecture of the people with the drudgery of the stone quarry and the distasteful art of the mason.

Again, how much of the philosophy, the poetry, the eloquence, the art and architecture, and above all the high ideals of manhood which Europe inherits from Greece would ever have been there to come down to us, had all her marble quarries been out-cropping seams of coal instead, and had her Olympian hills been “rich deposits” of iron ores rather than the high altars of transcendent ideas which they became—ideas which the much wider and more varied environments of Dante and Goethe and Milton have scarcely more than reproduced, varied, and enlarged upon?

RETURNING to our carpenter resources: without iron ores to speak of, with scarcely a ledge of marble, with available building stones only of the softest and most friable nature, or the flinty and intractable granites, Japan is a paradise of perennial forests and woods of the coarser texture. Of evergreens alone she possesses over one hundred and fifty varieties indigenous to the soil.

This abundance of woods and paucity of other building materials characterize every stage of the Japanese carpenter’s genius for adaptation. He took his first lessons in the art in the shop of the primitive ship-builder. His environment of forest-clad mountains and of seas
that swarm with fish has provided him with materials and double incentives that continued to promote his craft down to our day. The raft, the skiff, the sampan (or houseboat), the naval junk fleets of the twelfth century, the sail-ships of an incipient commerce modeled after those of Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch merchants—the building of which was prohibited as a preliminary to the seclusion of the country in the fifteenth century—and now the armored cruiser and the liner of many commercial companies: that was the order of development at the sea-side. The hut, the shrine, the temple, the yashiki, the palace, the castle: such was the line of progress in the interior.

But at every step of this work the carpenter was hampered by the second of the great conditions under which he labored. The earthquake and the typhoon as firmly restricted his undertakings as the most rigid of architects could have done. The first insisted upon elasticity, and the second upon strength in all his structures. The first put burnt brick out of consideration, imposed the leaning or inclined wall as the only means of using stone for extended and high foundations; and on such foundations both united to prescribe the retreating or pyramidal form for the wooden superstructure of the feudal castles.

The flooding rains of one season and the warping heats of another, each imposed its conditions upon the coverings of hut and palace alike. Without mills to gauge to a thickness, to tongue and groove his materials, he called the mat-maker to his assistance and gave Japan the softest and cleanest of floors without the costly carpets which nature, poverty and isolation denied. Earthquakes and frequent fires created a demand for the heavily stuccoed, tiled, and shuttered "go-down," or storehouse, which is a characteristic of all the land and of almost every habitation.

At sea, fleets of junks up to several hundred tons burden each attested not only the early aptitudes of the people for the water, but the far-seeing patience, skill, and powers of adaptation of the ship-carpenter. Without paints or preservatives, practically without iron or steel even for bolts or nails, he selected his woods, he fitted and shaped and joined his floating castle so as to make it durable, capacious, manageable in all weathers, and strong enough to ride out the typhoon with the best of our craft of similar dimensions.
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WESTERN people stand in amazement to see the builders and artisans of this so-called pigmy nation take the imported parts of our modern cruisers, assemble them, finish the vessels, and arm and man them. Still greater wonder is excited to behold the raw materials slowly growing into battle-ships and into first-class liners of a merchant marine that holds its own with the best equipped products of European and American capital. And a little flutter of consternation seizes upon some of the cabinets and councils of European states, whose admirals and commanders of the costliest and most luxuriously fitted naval structures ever fashioned out of ample resources, waste in dilettante seamanship, as in the case of Admiral Seymour, the prestige won by pioneers of these nations in the same art.

The peaceful and beneficent craft of the Japanese carpenter received a special impulse from about the seventh century of our era, when Buddhism was introduced. A newer and higher order of the builder’s profession, that of the architect, arose under the aegis of the Buddhist altars. Newly acquired principles of the roller, the lever, the pulley, the ramp, and the scaffold gave such an impulse to the art as no fellow-craftsman in America could conceive of without the intensest retrospective reflection. But of mystery there is none. All things confirm the sanity, the sacredness of the human will, skill, and devotion that have made Japan a land preëminently of homes and temples.

If the carpenter and cabinet-maker, for instance, sits while he works, whenever he can, it is because the matted floor, as explained above, has excluded the use of trestles and benches, and has cultivated that habitual attitude in all the vocations. If his saw and plane are set the reverse of those of the West, it is because that arrangement accommodates the tool best to the workman’s posture. If he has become exceedingly expert in joinery, splicing, dovetailing, etc., it is because he has never had machine-made bolts and nails to waste by the ton.

The patience and industry, as well as the skill with which this lowly servant of a nation’s needs has accomplished his task, are worthy of praise, and should contribute to our pride in this branch of the human race. I do not know that fires are more disastrous in Japan than with us in America. They are much more frequent. But the
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concentrations that expose hundreds of millions of property to a single excursion of the raging element have not been made there as yet. It is said that Tokyo is burned out every ten years—a tenth, at least, each year. So elsewhere throughout the realm. Yet with the earthquakes like that which recently overwhelmed Gifu; tidal waves such as the one that a few years ago swept over miles of territory in Northern Nippon and buried over 20,000 people in its course far inland; hurricanes that annually cut their swathes across the islands, levelling thousands of habitations in a single night; and conflagrations that leave multitudes homeless, the spirit of this dauntless people has never flagged. Catastrophes of the kind just named naturally enhance the esteem in which the carpenter and builder is held and the sense of dependence with which an entire people lean upon his craft.

Now the guild of this humble worker is but one of the many that go to make the forty-five millions of the Japanese. And the rest are all like him in industry, courage, and patriotism. Except the mystery that attaches to all life and to our common human origin and destiny, there is no more mystery in the development and doings of Japan of to-day than in those of England, France, or America. Any period of the evolution of any one of these states would be as puzzling to us, were they not so familiar, as the passing stage of Japanese development. Indeed, the fascination of all history consists in this strangeness, which has so much the flavor of fiction. Obviously, the lesson of it all to the statesmen and people, especially of our own highly progressive land, is to be found neither in ignorance nor prejudice, but in deeply intelligent appreciation.
A WORD FROM THE MASTER WORKMAN

JAPANESE CARPENTERS AT WORK