A JAPANESE IMPRESSIONIST: SOME DELICATELY IMAGINATIVE STUDIES OF BIRDS AND FLOWERS BY HIROSHIGE, WHOSE FAME RESTS CHIEFLY UPON HIS LANDSCAPES: BY ANNE HEARD DYER

HIROSHIGE is justly called the last of the great artist of Ukiyo-ye. This celebrated genre school had run a course of a hundred and fifty years’ development, and was already well into its decline when he appeared to awaken into a last creative glow its closing era. Up to this time landscape had played but a minor part in the depictions of wood engraving, being for the most part merely conventional and subsidiary to figure delineation; but it was now to take on an independent and impressive significance of its own. At the center of this movement stands Hiroshige, the creator and shaping influence thereof.

As a landscape artist, Hiroshige is fairly well known to the lovers of Japanese art in this country, and to many of them his work has served as inspiration and suggestion, but his pictures of birds and flowers remain almost wholly unknown, although some of his finest work is to be found among his “Kwa-Chō,” or bird and flower studies. Before speaking of these specifically, it may be well to state briefly the main facts of Hiroshige’s career, and the place that he fills in the history of Japanese wood engraving, a place that has been securely fixed by the lapse of two generations since his death.

Born at the close of the eighteenth century, of humble parentage, like most of the artists of this school, he began his career about eighteen hundred and twenty, and from that time until his death in eighteen hundred and fifty-nine his wide and varied activity never ceased. His fame rests chiefly upon his great sets of landscape views—the fifty-three stations of the Tokaido, the high-road running along the coast between Kyoto and Yedo (the present Tokyo); the sixty-nine Kisokaido views, the mountainous high-road of the interior running between the same two termini; the Kyoto Meisho, or views about Kyoto; and his celebrated hundred views of Yedo and its environs. Other smaller sets, perhaps less generally known, reach an even more sustained height of excellence; notably, the Yedo Kinko hakkei, the Omi hakkei, and the Kanazawa hakkei. These three latter sets, unfortunately now very rare, consisting of eight sheets each, are so gem-like in quality as to constitute the high water mark
of this kind of portrayal. Their themes are full of poetic suggestion, and cover a rich scope of atmospheric effect: evening rain—morning snow—homing birds—twilight bells—returning boats—clearing sky after storm—sunset—and the autumn moon—each depicting a varying phase of a certain famous locality.

If in this work we try to analyse Hiroshige’s charm, we come to see that it lies not in the things he depicts, for other artists have chosen equally attractive subjects, nor in the manner of his portrayal, for his technique is fully equalled by that of Hokusai and, in a narrower field, by that of Yeisen and Kuniyoshi, but that it lies in a certain subtly subjective quality of his art which enables him to portray not only the thing or scene, but also the mood awakened in his soul by the thing or scene, whether it be but a lonely little clam digger on the shore, or a rugged grandeur of coast scenery. In this respect he is pre-eminently an impressionist, perhaps not so much a visual as an imaginative impressionist; the subjects he chooses are those that have power over his feelings, not his thought. The bent of his genius may be described as emotional rather than scientific. Certain atmospheric effects seem to have exercised upon his feeling a peculiar power—the hour of dusk, for instance, when the pink and golden lights of sunset turn into the indigo softness of twilight, blurring the outlines of objects, eliminating sharp boundaries, and enlarging the sense of distances material and spiritual. Mist—and there are no mists like those of Japan, blue, spectral, immense—touches for him the phenomena of the world with a magic wand. Other artists have depicted the peculiarities of mist formations, and we know that it is mist, that underneath the fantastic aspects it produces are the unchanged outlines of the natural place; but when Hiroshige enters the mist world, we enter it with him. It is like opening suddenly a door of our forgotten childhood, when all things fantastic and strange were natural and real, and the world of goblins and elves even more vividly true than that of mere men and women. And so with snow and rain and wind. Atmosphere was a vital part of his consciousness and in studying his work, it becomes a part of ours. For this we owe him much, and it is by no injustice that his fame rests finally upon his great landscape productions. But it rests not alone upon these. There is another field, if not of equal importance, at least of equal charm, in which he is too little known.

In the earliest years of his artistic activity, when his energies were more or less tentative, Hiroshige tried his hand at many things, among others at actor and figure delineation. He quickly perceived
that not here was his *metier*. His figures were with few exceptions wooden, his actors conventional. Here he could but follow in the path marked out by others; and Hiroshige had the spirit of a leader, a pioneer, a discoverer. He next turned his attention to the world of Nature. But in the animal world there had always been great masters, whose conceptions were of a boldness, a bigness, with which he, constrained by the narrow limits of wood engraving, could never hope to compete. Ganku’s tigers glared at him from a painter’s canvas with fiery contempt. In like manner the delicious monkeys and puppies of Okio treated him with merry derision. This sphere was already occupied, filled, and there was no room for flat, wooden-block depictions of a life that floated and moved in space. But there was another and closely related natural field, that of birds and flowers, which, to be sure, had been consummately treated by Korin, Sotatsu, and others of scarcely less fame, but which nevertheless lent itself readily to the methods of the wood engraver. To this Hiroshige applied himself with zeal, and at least a decade of his freshest activity was spent in developing to something like perfection this line of his invention.

Here we see the beginnings of atmospheric effect in his art. Although subordinated, the moods of nature which were later to take such deep hold upon his feelings and artistic consciousness are not absent even in these vivid realistic studies of the flying inhabitants of the upper air. Almost we can hear the exultant cry of the wild hawk dashing through the blast of a storm that turns to inky blackness the tops of the pine trees below, while the rain sweeps in slanting broadsides from above. In fine contrast with this print we have a companion one of two mandarin ducks (*oshidori*), emblems of conjugal love, swimming peacefully in a still pool, on the edge of which grows the wild marsh grass. And in both we find a vigor of treatment, a broad and powerful manner quite lacking in some of his later work; while the richness of his color, the masterly blending and gradation of his tones, is hardly conceivable as the result of such rude means as the wood engraver possessed in a few coarsely cut wooden blocks. The sharp *notan*, or balance of color value, of the flaming red parrot perched on a pine branch between spiky whorls of softest green and astringent black, is depicted with a sculpturesque precision. Again in excellent contrast is the dreamy poetry and melancholy of what is perhaps the most beautiful of all this class of prints,—that of the wild geese silhouetted in flight across a full autumn moon shining clear above gray masses of scudding cloud. This theme is always
"ALMOST WE CAN HEAR THE EXULTANT CRY OF THE WILD HAWK DASHING THROUGH THE BLAST OF A STORM * * * THE TIPS OF THE PINE TREES BELOW."
From a Print by Hiroshige.

"The very essence of spring in the open-throated ecstasy of the little green songster on a cherry branch drooping with bloom."
From a Print by Hiroshige.

"DREAMY POETRY AND MELANCHOLY SHOWN IN PRINT
OF WILD GEESE IN FLIGHT ACROSS A FULL AUTUMN
MOON, ABOVE MASSES OF SCUDDING CLOUDS."
From a Print by Hiroshige.

"MANDARIN DUCKS SWIMMING IN A DEEP POOL ON THE EDGE OF WHICH GROWS THE WILD MARSH GRASS."
“TENDERNESS AND CHARM IN THE GROUP OF HOME SWALLOWS DARTING TOWARD A Nanten BUSH IN THE ROSE EVENING LIGHT.”
"KINGFISHER HOVERING ABOVE A SPRAY OF IRIS, FROM THE FOOT OF WHICH CURVES AWAY AN ELUSIVE BLUE SUGGESTION OF WATER."

From a Print by Hiroshige.
closely associated in the Japanese mind with the bereavement of conjugal love. There are numberless poems on this subject in their literature, and it is a favorite conception of their art. Full of tenderness and charm is the depiction of a group of homing swallows darting toward a nanten bush in the clear, rosy, evening light; while a little poem without words might be called the narrow panel—just the shape and size of the strips of stiff paper upon which Japanese poems are usually written—which shows us a kingfisher hovering above a spray of growing iris, from the foot of which curves away in elusive blue a shadowy suggestion of water.

As in the landscapes, here, too, we see the power of Nature’s moods emphasized; perhaps more truly we might call it the power of the momentary, the transient in nature, as opposed to the habitual and permanent. Hiroshige’s treatment of this world is never that of still life; it is a world always animate, in motion, in the act of change. His view is not that of the naturalist, it is objective, sympathetic, emotional, almost sensuous. He never presents to you a species of bird, as such; but he gives you a momentary glimpse of the beauty of nature as typified by the joyous darting of a bird through blue air; or, as in the print reproduced, the very essence of spring in the open-throated ecstasy of the little green songster on a cherry branch drooping with bloom. What a suffusion of life, color, movement, sound, is here expressed in three flat tones, green and white, with a strip of rose color at the top of the panel, a mere convention of atmosphere, signifying the brilliant rosy light of early morning, of a day clear as crystal, still beaded with dew perhaps, but with no filmy mists or soft obscuring hazes; it is a world washed with light, new-born, fragrant, with the dazzling clarity of certain rare days in a Japanese April, such as only the Japanese and the fortunate few who have lived in Japan can know. Yet no naturalist could more perfectly represent the character of a bird.

Could the peculiarly spiritual quality of Hiroshige’s art be summed up in a phrase, it might be in that which Mr. Henry James applied to Flaubert: “The sweetest things in the world of art or the life of letters,” he says, “are the irresponsible sympathies which seem to rest on divination.” It is these “irresponsible sympathies that seem to rest on divination” which Hiroshige, by virtue of his peculiar sensitiveness, his gifts of mind and heart as well as those of eye and hand, has been able to grasp and render palpable, so that the impressions that set his mind vibrating with pleasure and emotion are crystallized for us into eternal possessions.