

WHISTLER AND THE ART OF THE ORIENT

J. CLARENCE WEBSTER

FOR a generation or more the Western world has been accustomed to certain modest establishments in the larger cities, wherein various objects of art are offered for sale by quiet and courteous gentlemen of brownish colour, anxious to satisfy the desires of a curious or art-loving public. Umbrellas and fans of brilliant hues, pretty pots and plates, grotesque carvings of gods and demons, and a hundred other objects both ornamental and useful are the staple products exhibited. So successful has been this business that even the great department stores have been seduced by the subtle charms of Eastern art, and have established thriving counters for the convenience of their culture-loving patrons.

Thus it has come to pass that many private houses have not been considered artistically complete unless adorned with Japanese bric-a-brac, e. g., gaudily decorated fans placed at various angles on the walls, carved monkeys and grotesque figures suspended from gas brackets and chandeliers, large paper umbrellas covering the fire-place, black, yellow and red lacquer boxes in various conspicuous places. Japanese art means to the million such cheap and flimsy knick-knackery. But if an enterprising American were to set up a shop in Tokio, selling banjos, bones, tin-whistles and Jews' harps as representative of the musical instruments of the Western world; or Grand Rapids furniture, coloured cartoons of *Puck* and *Judge*, plaster replicas of some of the familiar Rogers groups of statuary as specimens of our highest artistic productions, the enlightenment of the Japanese would be about equal to that effected in the Western world by the shop-goods to which I have referred. The real motives which underlie the extensive art export trade from Japan are not flattering to our intelligence. It is a tribute to our own poor taste, and in reality is an expression of the value which the Japanese have set upon our popular standards of aesthetics.

From the very beginning of intercourse between Japan and the West, the articles which were brought to Europe by the Dutch and Portuguese traders were made especially for the export trade in factories established in the island of Dishima, and, after 1641, at Nagasaki. The works of their great artists—painting,

sculpture, carving and fine metal work—were not obtainable by the foreigners, so highly were they treasured by the people. Some good pottery and lacquer were, however, exported from time to time, and influenced European craftsmen very considerably. A craze for lacquer developed in different countries, especially in France during the reigns of Louis XV and XVI. Cabinet-makers incorporated pieces of Japanese workmanship in their own productions, or actually sent their furniture to the Dutch factories in Japan to be finished in lacquer. Some of these specimens are now preserved in the leading museums of Europe and America. An interesting collection is that made by Marie Antoinette, now to be seen in the Louvre.

The explanation of the ignorance of the outside world regarding the art treasures of Japan until recent times is very simple. They were almost entirely in the possession of the nobles, who were the chief patrons of the artists. Scorning trade and traders, even of their own country, and hating foreigners, they could have no intercourse with the Dutch and Portuguese, and, indeed the latter were not likely to be capable of appreciating the native masterpieces, even if they had had the opportunity of seeing them. Moreover there was very strict governmental inspection of all articles sold to foreigners.

It was not until the overthrow of the feudal system in 1868 that a new condition of affairs developed. After the re-establishment of the authority of the Mikado, one of the first acts of his government required all the nobles to dispose of their armour and weapons. This was effectual in breaking the spirit of the fighting classes, for the sword of the Samurai had ever been his proudest possession. Very soon the shops of Tokio and Kiyoto were filled with magnificent specimens of swords, daggers, lances, armour and other military accoutrements, which were offered for sale at very low prices. Many of these found their way into foreign hands and were shipped to Europe and America. As the Samurai became impoverished, other treasures drifted into the market; and as the trade barriers between Japan and the outer world were abolished, foreign merchants and travellers soon found ample opportunities of demonstrating the power of foreign gold. As if by magic, a commercial instinct was implanted in the nation, fostered by the advisers of the Mikado, whose intelligence had shrewdly fathomed the secret of Western power. The corrupting influence of money penetrated even into the holiest places, and the sale of temple treasures by Buddhist priests became so notorious that the government were finally forced to nationalize the temples, placing their seal on the contents. Only the highest nobles were proof against

the new temptation. Indeed, up to the present time, they have parted with a comparatively small proportion of their best works of art, the majority of which are now in the United States. Apart from the temple collections, the chief treasures of Japan have been and still are in the possession of the royal and aristocratic families.

In 1862, six years after Whistler first went to Paris, a little shop was opened in the Rue de Rivoli by a M. Houseil and his wife for the sale of embroideries, lacquers, pottery and porcelain which they imported from Japan and China. In course of time it became known to artists and connoisseurs, and enthusiasm for oriental *objets d'art* became very marked. Degas, Manet, Monet, Whistler, Fantin Latour, Bracquemond, Jacquemart, the De Goncourt brothers, Zola and other men of note became frequent visitors to the little shop, enraptured by the beauty and novelty of its contents which they purchased with a liberal hand. They formed societies for study and enjoyment; and very soon a new art literature relating to Japan, descriptive, analytical and comparative, began to appear.

Some years ago I had the pleasure of meeting M. Houseil, and heard an interesting account from him of his experience as a dealer in Paris. He remembered when the first work of the great Japanese artist, Hokusai, made its appearance in Europe. It was one of the master's small sketch books, and was used as packing in a box of pottery. Bracquemont, the etcher, happened to be in the shop when the box was opened. When he examined the book his enthusiasm knew no bounds, and he rushed from the place to make a round of the studios and exhibit the work of a master to his artist friends. Very soon other works by Hokusai came from Japan and excited general admiration, and a critical study of this master was shortly afterwards published by De Goncourt.

This was not a passing craze, a mere episode in the life of novelty-loving Parisians. It was the revelation of a new world to young and ardent workers of keen mind and sensitive imagination. Formalism and academic conventionality, divorced from aesthetic ideals, had reduced European art to a monotonous level of mere prettiness. Theodore Duret, writing of this period, says:

Only certain subjects were then believed worthy of art. Scenes from antiquity, the representation of historic episodes, and religious subjects were given the preference as having in themselves the character of nobility. In a lower grade were compositions relating to remote countries having an exotic charm for the imagination—an idealized Italian landscape, an Egyptian street scene, or even the sands of the desert were in demand, but to reproduce a Normandy pasture with cows and fruit-trees was

to be grossly realistic and degraded, while to paint an ordinary man in ordinary clothing was to show oneself devoid of all proper artistic feeling. Of all the themes permissible to the artist, the nude was first in importance.

Courbet was the first to revolt against these standards. He was followed by Manet, who is to be regarded as the most potent factor in overthrowing them and in giving the lead to the young and eager spirits of his time.

The little Japanese shop was opened at a crucial moment. Eyes longing for new visions of the beautiful found therein a revelation. Fresh impulses were aroused, and minds were filled with new inspiration. Many of the leading artists of the last fifty years, especially those of French origin or education, e. g., Stevens, Manet, Degas, Millet, Puvis de Chavannes, have felt this influence. The last mentioned artist was always ready to acknowledge his indebtedness to Oriental art, and some of his best pictures owe their striking qualities to this source. In England, Dante Gabriel Rossetti was one of the first to join the movement. In America, Elihu Vedder, Robert Blum, John Alexander, John Le Farge and others became earnest followers; and the last named has, in his writings and lectures, done much to interest and enlighten the public in regard to the art of Japan. But of all the artists of the Old World or the New, America's great genius—James MacNeil Whistler—felt most the influence of the Japanese, and most successfully demonstrated in his works their principles of aesthetics.

In the early days of his career in Europe he was one of the most enthusiastic patrons of the little shop on the Rue de Rivoli. Though his means were slender, his purchases were numerous, and whether living in Paris or London he continued to add to his collection. Writing from London in 1864 to his friend Fantin Latour, he advised the latter to visit the shop as often as possible. Thus in one letter he says: "You will tell me the gossip of the salon and the Café de Baden, and above all about your little visits to the Japanese shop." In another, he begs him to see a lacquer soup-bowl of which he has heard, and explains how to distinguish old from new lacquer. Again he requests that the proprietor should put aside all new costumes for his inspection. In 1865 he was painted in a Japanese dress in a group-picture by Fantin Latour called *The Toast*, exhibited in the salon, and afterwards destroyed.

In 1866 Whistler decided to move from London to Paris, and was forced to sell the greater portion of his collection. His paintings of this period afford ample evidence of the impression made on him by his Oriental studies. First, in point of time, was *Die Lange*

Leizen of the Six Marks. This is a decorative scheme representing a Chinese girl engaged in painting a jar. Though the colours are rich and striking, they are arranged in a low key, without confusion of design, characteristics usually found in the best Japanese paintings and engravings. Writing to Fantin Latour in regard to this work, Whistler says, "It is difficult and I erase so much. There are times when I think I have learned how to do things, and then again I am discouraged."

La Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine or *Rose and Silver*, the central feature of the famous peacock room, once in London, but now in the Freer Museum at Washington, is a full-length study of a woman in a graceful Japanese costume, the flowing lines of which remind one of the finest productions of Kiyonaga or Utamaro. On the floor is a beautiful rug, and behind her an exquisitely painted screen. The whole effect is one of splendour, "subdued to a matchless refinement of tone."

The Golden Screen, of 1864, a caprice in purple and gold, represents a woman, also in Japanese dress, sitting on the floor, examining an engraving of Hiroshige, while others are scattered at her feet. In the background is a fine old Japanese screen.

In the Balcony (1867), an arrangement in flesh-colour and green, the river with a long line of buildings on the opposite shore forms a background of neutral gray and brown, while on a balcony in the foreground is a group of girls in brilliant Japanese costumes in tones of rose, orange, purple and celadon. The landscape is that seen from the artist's Chelsea window—the Thames, chimneys, barges, foggy sky and dreary waters, the costumes, screens and guitars being chosen from his collection. "It is," says Mr. Child, "a vision of form and colour in luminous air, a Japanese fancy realized on the banks of the gray Thames."

These works are evident realistic caprices, painted without any ideas of imitating or transposing Japanese scenes, or creating an illusion of the extreme Orient. There is no attempt at ethnographic interpretation, genre-work or story-telling. The artist revelled in the joy of painting the beautiful things which he admired, and carrying out the striking and remarkable harmonies of brilliant colours which they suggested. They were the outcome of his first period of awakened interest and enthusiasm. Soon, however, he abandoned this use of his Japanese accessories. His keen mind began an analysis of the characteristics of Japanese aesthetics, in an endeavour to ascertain the underlying principles which had guided the Eastern artists. How well he succeeded is evidenced by the great works which he afterwards gave to the world, nearly all of

which are painted with a newness of vision possible only to discriminating eyes which had penetrated the subtleties of Oriental art. He learned the secret of their harmonies of tone, their principles of composition, their wonderful balancing of irregular forms and spaces, their arbitrary choice of a point of view, e. g., looking at a scene from below or from a level higher than that on which one would ordinarily view it. He dared to break away from the traditional rendering of artificial studio arrangement and symbolic interpretations.

In the generation before his time, the predominant feature in the schools of painting was the moral or the thought to be conveyed in the picture. Colour harmonies were considered of lesser importance, John Ruskin, the first critic of his time, stating that colour is a most unimportant characteristic of objects, and that the truths of colour are the least important of all truths. This wonderful generalization from the man who said that in Rembrandt's work the colours were all wrong from beginning to end, that the browns and grays of this master could express only vulgarity, dulness or impiety!

Whistler's work, like that of the Japanese, demonstrates—as a more recent critic states—that line, colour and composition are “self-subsistent and orderly progressions of individual beauty, capable of almost infinite variation and extension; and that, though bound up with the feeling of the thought implied, they are as positive and transcendent as the world of pure instrumental music. Subject, indeed, is not then lost, but rather absorbed by or translated into the beauty of the form—quite as the thought of a lyric poem becomes transfigured in its graceful garb of words.”

Or, as Whistler has himself expressed it:

As music is the poetry of sound, so is painting the poetry of sight, and the subject matter has nothing to do with the harmony of sound or colour. Art should be independent of all clap-trap, should stand alone and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it, as devotion, pity, love, patriotism and the like.

All these have no concern with art; and that is why Whistler insisted on calling his works “arrangements” and “harmonies.”

His picture of his mother, now in the Luxemburg, was first exhibited as an “Arrangement in Gray and Black;” for, as he said, that is what it was, the identity of the portrait being a matter of no importance. It is no wonder that Whistler's superb works, which belong to the purest form of art, were utterly misunderstood by the English public to which they were first presented—a public which

found its keenest enjoyment in Frith's Derby Day, a Railway Station, or a Crowd on Brighton Beach. "The great majority of English folk," said Whistler, "cannot and will not consider a picture apart from any story which it may be supposed to tell. My picture of a *Harmony in Gray and Gold* is an illustration of my meaning—a snow scene, with a single black figure and a lighted tavern. I care nothing for the past, present or future of the black figure, placed there because the black was wanted at that spot. All that I know is that my combination of gray and gold is the basis of my picture. This is precisely what my friends cannot grasp. They say, 'Why not call it *Trotty Veck*, and sell it for a round harmony of golden guineas?' "

Because of the sympathetic quality in the portrait of his mother, in which reverend age is represented with great repose, refinement and dignity of manner, various critics have tried to paint a halo about Whistler, attributing to him an exceptionally noble and exalted character. Such a claim could not be sustained, and would of course have been most vigorously repudiated by the artist himself. In the painting of his mother the model was fitted into the scheme of the picture with consummate skill, but we cannot doubt that Whistler would have been able to make an equally successful painting with any other mother as a subject.

One of his strongest contentions related to the distinction which must be made between art and nature. "Nature rarely presents an artistic composition," he said, "and, therefore, slavish copying of nature will not result in artistic productions." "Nature is very rarely right, to such an extent, even, that it might almost be said that nature is usually wrong." This was the standpoint of the great artists of China and Japan for many centuries. Nature may afford in abundance raw material; it is the work of the artist to select from this storehouse.

It is interesting to quote from a Japanese critic of more than a hundred years ago, referring to the naturalistic reproductions of a painter of the early nineteenth century:—

In his landscapes there is less success, as he is so particular about insuring correctness of forms that they are lacking in high ideas and deep spirit. For a landscape painting is not loved because it is a facsimile of the natural scene, but because there is something in it greater than mere accurate representation of natural forms, which appeals to our feelings, but which we cannot express in words. To introduce too much is commonplace, and the artist must exercise his judgment in omitting everything superfluous or detrimental to the attainment of his object. It is the fault of foreign pictures that they dive too deeply into realities,

and preserve too many details that were better suppressed. Such works are but as groups of words; a picture should aspire to be a poem of form and colour.

This statement expresses exactly Whistler's theory and practice, and may be found elaborated in his writings. His words are not a mere copy of this or any other Oriental critic, for in Whistler's day their expositions were entirely unknown in Europe. Whistler's philosophy of art was derived solely from a study of Japanese productions themselves; he quickly arrived at an understanding of the principles underlying their composition. Henceforth, his life was one long struggle to achieve mastery in embodying these ideas in his work, and to convince the world of art that it was wrong and he was right. In England especially he met with fierce opposition, contempt and scorn, John Ruskin being foremost in denunciation of Whistler's paintings and his ideas, and referring to one of his most famous pictures as the painter's impertinent effort to fling a pot of paint in the face of the public. Yet, to-day, that very picture, *Battersea Bridge*, is one of the most treasured possessions of the British nation, while Ruskin is for ever discredited as a critic, and Whistler has taken his place as one of the world's great masters.

The Japanese and Chinese consider painting as the art of two dimensions, and they do not attempt to give the illusion of a third. Tactile values, roundness, and modelling are all subordinate to flat relations. Shadows and reflections, which so often encumber and disfigure the works of Western artists, are deliberately omitted by the Orientals, and in the rare instances in which they were employed there was some special reason determined by the character of the composition. They were not employed indiscriminately to bring objects into relief. In their art-education the Japanese, like the pre-Renaissance artists of Europe, laid the greatest stress on composition, their achievements in this particular surpassing in power and balance those of the Western world. Their work was characterized by restraint, simplicity and directness, and it is in no way derogatory to their art that those qualities, which have appealed so strongly to the best artists of modern times, were due largely to the limitations of their technique.

Regarding this a few words should be said. They applied paint to silk or paper in watery solution, using a very wet brush, each stroke requiring to be precise, definite and final. There was no erasure, no alteration, for the delicate silk and spongy paper absorbed the pigment so thoroughly that any attempt to alter the painted surface meant ruin. The process was thus more difficult than our fresco-painting. In the latter the artist requires to apply the brush very quickly on the wet plaster, no change being possible

unless the latter is cut away and a fresh coat applied. It is interesting to note that Oriental painting and European fresco-painting have certain characteristics in common, viz., unity of design, avoidance of unimportant detail, and disregard of chiaroscuro.

The artist wished to obtain one effect in each picture, and this had to be attained with the greatest economy of means. It was impossible to introduce the ornate and elaborate schemes possible in oil-painting; but for this there is every reason to be thankful, inasmuch as Oriental art has thereby been spared many of the faults due to a pliant and easy technique.

A frequent criticism of Occidental painting by the Orientals is that it aims to produce an illusion, making the picture look so real as to deceive one into the belief that he is looking at nature, as if this could really be accomplished with paint. The Oriental artist strove to reproduce the spirit rather than the substance. His object was the expression of pure beauty; and in the greatest works of the various schools, whether the majestic landscapes of Sesshiu or the *genre* colour-prints of Kiyonaga, the attainment of the artist's purpose was reached through selection, emphasis and idealization. By choosing only what is essential, by the placing of his masses, by rhythm of line and by an exquisite harmony of colours, the artist's aim was not to imitate, but to present the subject in such a manner as to produce in the onlooker the same sentiments with which he himself was inspired. "To understand his paintings," says Lowell, "it is from this standpoint that they must be regarded; not as soulless photographs of scenery, but as poetic presentations of the spirit of the scenes." "Nature," says Whistler, "contains the elements, in colour and form, of all pictures, as the keyboard contains the notes of all music. But the artist is born to pick and choose, and group with science these elements that the result may be beautiful—as the musician gathers his notes, and forms his chords, until he brings forth from chaos glorious harmony."

It was in the attainment of this principle in his art that Whistler reached his highest level, and approached most nearly to the best Japanese standards. Indeed the series of symphonies, arrangements, harmonies, and nocturnes at which the British public jeered some forty years ago, are alone worthy, in the whole range of Occidental art, to be compared to the masterpieces of Japan in delicate charm and subtle beauty. How fitting it is that, in the great museum which the late Mr. Freer erected in Washington, the masterpieces of the Orient should be placed side by side with those of Whistler! For in the words of Fenollosa, "he is the interpreter of East to West and of West to East."