The Genius of Japan

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On leaving the Grafton Gallery last week I called at Goupil's with a photograph of one of Mr. Whistler's pictures, which I intended to have framed. The red velvet curtain that divides the galleries was drawn, from which I inferred that pictures were being hung on the other side. I peeped through. The finishing hand was being put to the hanging of an exhibition of coloured prints. One glance was sufficient to tell me that I was looking at things divinely beautiful, that I was in the presence of an art never seen before by me, and I stood as if enchanted.

Until that memorable day, what did I know of the art of Japan? Probably not much more than yourself, dear reader. My knowledge of that wonderful country was chiefly acquired from the common screen and fan which we meet everywhere. True, that I was superficially acquainted with "Hokusai," and had turned over the leaves of some of those pornographic albums which seem to form a part of the life work of every Japanese artist. But independent of any moral question, Art for its own sake should be pure; all adventitious attractions, whether pornographic or sentimental, interrupt that serenity, that aloofness which, believe me, is indispensable if we would enter the true paradise of aesthetic contemplation.

So much, and no more, was my knowledge of Japan; and truly it was little more than that of the average person who forms his opinion of Japanese art from the fans and screens exhibited in Regent Street windows. Admirable as these often are, they bear no nearer relation to true Japanese art than the grillroom of the South Kensington Museum does to English art, as exemplified in the pictures of Reynolds, Gainsborough, Hogarth, Wilson, and Turner. The difference between Mr. Luke Fildes and Reynolds is not greater than that which divides Regent-Street Japan from the sublime artists whose works I saw last week for the first time. Shunstro, Yeishi, Harunobu, Toyokuni; above all, Utamaro, who seems to me to be unquestionably Japan's greatest artist – its Michael Angelo. I have omitted the name of Hokusai, because I wish to accentuate an impression that the exhibition conveys of the mistake of Western criticism in placing him at the head of Japanese art. For Hokusai owes his reputation to Western appreciation; the Japanese had passed him by until called to account by the West, and so Hokusai's name has been celebrated above that of Utamaro. But the present exhibition is surely a complete vindication of the superior discernment of the East. By the side of the large genius of Utamaro, Hokusai seems small and insignificant; and so very marked is this impression in me, that I am inclined to think that I am for the moment unduly blind to the merits of Hokusai. Perhaps fresh study will reveal beauties in his work which escaped me last week. However this may be, I am at least sure that I shall never forego my opinion that Utamaro is the greatest artist that Japan has produced.

At the beginning of this century an art wholly unknown to Western eyes, unimagined by Western minds, was suddenly discovered to Western culture – the VVest was suddenly confronted with an aestheticism differing wholly from its own, an aestheticism in which all the realism on which

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we had learnt to set such store was ignored – nowhere an attempt to produce the illusion of round objects by modelling, or to follow the anatomical construction of the human face and body. The human face was invariably represented by means of a formula capable of expressing general racial characteristics, but not of retaining any faintest shadow of individual likeness. The human body was represented even more arbitrarily – legs and arms taking the curves which seemed to the artist to come most happily into his scheme of lineal composition. Nor yet a trace of those elementary laws of perspective, outside of which we fondly believed pictorial art could not exist; chiaroscuro, aerial perspective, and atmospheric effect, were equally unknown to these admirable artists, and we could refer back neither to the Greeks, the Florentines, nor to the Dutchmen. Here I must interpose with a remark which I hope will not be judged to be wholly irrelevant. When studying the early Italians in the New Gallery, standing before 148, a beautiful decorative panel by Matteo da Siena, the thought "how very Japanese this is" came suddenly upon me, and turning to my catalogue I find this note: "There was a moment in the history of Italian art when a mere accident must have determined its direction. There was a moment when it was a question whether it would be the East or the West that would invent Japan."

But this analogy was easily passed over at the end of last century, or at the beginning of this, at whatever time real Japanese art was brought under the notice of Western culture; so we may say that an entirely new art – an aestheticism in flagrant opposition to every rule that had obtained on the hither side of India for two thousand years – was suddenly submitted to the criticism of the West. It is strange, then, that Europe did not hesitate longer than it did before accepting the new art; and it would be too much to hope that in the embarrassment of the choice created by the profusion of artistic wealth, as well as by its novelty, that Europe should have chosen Hokusai rather than Utamaro. In a moment so unprepared, Eurnpe would surely choose that which was nearest itself, that which was least Japanese; and Hokusai is certainly not so superbly typical of Japan as Utamaro.

And what happened to Europe at the beginning of the century happened to me last week. Dazzled by so much genius, and bewildered by an aestheticism which, if not unfamiliar, was at least exhibited to me under new conditions, I was naturally first attracted by designs which are least characteristic of Japan; not by Hokusai, it is true, for I began where the catalogue begins, and Hokusai is not exhibited on the first wall. 3, a group of three girls, by Tshoki, seemed to me extremely beautiful; I loved the pink dresses, for some fancied reminiscence of Watteau, and then thought them deficient in delicacy of colour; for my eye was suddenly taken by 16, a noble lady with a fan, by Yeishi. This I could see was rarer in design and more refined in colour. At that moment, overcome by so much beauty, I wished to buy one of these drawings; I felt I must buy one before leaving the exhibition. I felt that I must buy one at once and so ease my feelings, otherwise I could not proceed with my examination. But which? Ah I the torture of indecision; 3 I had little difficulty in rejecting, but 16, a noble lady with a fan, held me, fascinated me; a sort of perverse fascination, for I felt that 1, a girl's head by Shunstro, was superior – a half life-size head, a portrait as far as the formula admits of individual likeness…. How splendidly drawn, quite in the grand style… that single line which makes the face – how simple, how firm, how decorative; like a Velasquez it holds, decorating the paper even when I stand at the other end of the room.... I must have that bead, I must – I must. For five pounds I bought it, and as I watched

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the little slip of paper SOLD put into the corner, I thought of where I should hang it, and the pleasure it would be to rest my eyes from my book in the winter evenings and feed them upon that beautiful drawing.

Handing over my five pounds had operated as a kind of purge, and I was able to examine the rest of the drawings with more composure.

Truly I have not experienced so intense an artistic excitement since the memorable evening when I witnessed "Tristan and Isolde." I admired with bated breath the learned harmony of 17, "Cortège Passing the Peerless Mountain," by Toyokuni. I wrote in my catalogue, "How strangely well they understood their art, how they extract from it all it can give of harmony of line and balance; a figure on the right holds what seems like black carriage-mops in the air; if one of those black spots were taken away the composition would fall to pieces. What beautiful economy, of line and spot; the very slightest proves upon examination to be an integral part of the design."

The next picture that drew my eyes and absorbed my attention was 26 – ladies under trees, by Utamaro. But it would be impossible to speak of the extraordinary delicacy and refinement of this composition in the last paragraph of an article. Besides, the exhibition contains some of the finest examples of this great master; true, that I am acquainted with none other except those in the present exhibition, but there are limits whence genius may not go, and it is obvious that Utamaro exhausted the possibilities of his art in these drawings. I shall praise them as well as I may next week. Such genius as his claims an entire article. The Grafton Gallery, Albert Moore, and the Royal Academy must stand over. G.M.

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