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ASHIKAGA YOSHIMASA.
(Sculpture Said to Be By Himself.)

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A LIFE AND A WAY OF LIFE

MEMOIRS OF ASHIKAGA YOSHIMASA

BY W. G. BLAIRIE MURDOCH

SO MUCH has been said about light being essential to human progress, so much about the opposition to light by the Catholic Church, that there are people who are apt to forget how finely practical an institution it was and is. If its hierarchs opposed the early efforts to discover anaesthetics, the Protestant bodies have never quite rivalled the Catholic, in the matter of offering men and women things which are of practical value, as bringing comfort in the battle of life. Enquiring as to how the Buddhist Church has compared, in this particular, with the two main Christian bodies, it is felt that the philosophy unfolded by the Rev. Ashikaga Yoshimasa is, in a sense, rather like the Confessional. Looming silliness itself to the logician, this last has yet been of extraordinary worth to simple folk. And apparently trivial as they are, the things which Yoshimasa set forth are nevertheless calculated, to be of high use to mankind. The world may change endlessly, but what this vanquished Japanese taught will still be of excellence.

At the close of the twelfth century A. D., when rule in Japan slipped from the Mikado's court, and was acquired by the Shogun, or military dictator, the event was accompanied by wide metamorphosis. Heretofore, the life of the upper classes had been a marvel of refinement; now, conversely, there grew manifest among them a rude militarism. Hitherto they had worshipped skill in verse, or in painting; now, in contrast, physical strength and martial prowess were the things they extolled. As the years sped on, the new spartanism evolved into an awful turbulence, with the sword-bearing aristocracy, who became little better than banditti. And Nippon stood desperately in need of an ameliorating influence, when Yoshi-

masa was born in 1435, by which time the Shogunate had been made an hereditary office with his family, the Ashikaga.

When he was only eight, Yoshimasa became nominally Shogun. He chanced to give offence to a powerful nobleman, Lord Yamana Mochitoyo. And it illustrates well the robberlike ways of the barons with their utter contempt for the so-called government, that in 1455 the offended peer vented his spite at the young Shogun by marching as conqueror into Kyoto, the metropolis, with an army of retainers. It was not long before it was only too evident that Yoshimasa was utterly unfitted for the task which he was fated to essay. He was unjust in his mode of levying taxes; his real interest lay in the fine arts; he reflected an excellent connoisseurship moreover. Having an especial fondness for the beautiful plays, called generically *No*, or *Accomplishment*, he keenly endeavored to get the men of the military aristocracy to engage in amateur performances of those dramas. His favorite painter was Oguri Sotan, to whom always on New Year's Day he presented a silken robe. It pleased the Shogun to befriend young men, who gave promise of talent. And he selected as his page the boy, Goto Yujo, of whose chisellings on sword-furniture an enthusiastic commentator, Inaba Michitatsu, was to write long afterwards, that they "resembled the weeping willow, swaying gently in the breeze, or the lovely lotus, spangled with pearls of dew."

Fair words indeed! But whilst the Ashikaga dictator was showing forth his sound taste in art, the Sunrise Land was steadily growing more and more combustible. In 1464 the Shogun, being childless, named as his prospective successor in office, his brother, Gijin, a priest, who accordingly re-entered the world. Scarcely had these things been done, when a boy was born to Yoshimasa, who weakly sought to annul his promise to Gijin. A vast civil-war ensued, nearly all the barons plunging into it. One party stood for the ex-priest, the other for the Shogun's infant son. Kyoto and neighborhood were devastated; the national finances passed into an awful plight. At length the bewildered Yoshimasa vowed despairingly, that he could try no longer to manage the country. And in 1474 he abdicated, his son of nine years old becoming nominally Shogun. But the huge internecine contest blazed on, till 1477.

Close to Kyoto is Mount Higashi. And on that side of it further from the town is Ginkagu, or the Silver Pavilion. It is embowered in a forest of the richest; everywhere only greenery is seen; the stillness is tense. And the mere consciousness that Kyoto, with

her myriads, lies but on the other side of the hill, hidden thereby, render deeper the feeling of seclusion at the Silver Pavilion. There are three houses, each small and quite simple, save that on one of the group the caves are painted beneath with silvern pigment, whence the name of the trio, Ginkagu. This decoration was executed at the behest of Yoshimasa, apparently when he was still in office. For it seems to have been then that he built the secluded country home, where he lived always after his abdication. And henceforth he was usually spoken of as Mr. Mount Higashi. If it was bitter to be styled thus, after being overlord of all Nippon, if the ex-Shogun's purse was now small furthermore, assuredly his little domain was



GINKAGU OR SILVER PAVILION

ideal, for one whose dream was to forget the storms of life. It was seldom, if ever, that statesman or soldier visited the forestbound retreat. But it soon became the prime rallying-point with the outstanding artists of the time, whatever the form of art they practised. And there was a strong religious bond between Yoshimasa and this circle of congenial friends.

If Christianity is a term with a wide variety of significance, if consequently it is difficult to offer an adequate definition of the faith, it is easy to specify things which came out of it: for example, given forms of art, or of charity. The Buddhist body, in which Yoshimasa

was brought up, was the Zen Shu, or Contemplation Church, the particular branch to which he belonged being called the Rinzai. The alleged founder of the Zennists was a Hindu, Bodhidharma, who lived at the outset of the sixth century A. D., and personally expounded his creed in China. A noted Zen priest there, in the ninth century, was Rinzai, after whom is called the Rinzai branch of the Contemplation Church. The Zennists were addicted to the contention, that a man will win the salvation of his soul by beholding, through concentrated thought, his own inner nature. And if this sounds rather cryptic, it is among the recorded sayings of Bodhidharma himself, that the gospel of Zen is really too mysterious to be described in words. Nevertheless, out of the Zen Shu, as from Christianity, there emanated various things which are easily defined. In China, under the Sung Kings, in power from 960 to 1277, there grew prominent a particular type of painting, which was chiefly if not exclusively practised by Zennists, and which owed its character to Zen teaching. Of hieratic pictures or sculptures, the votaries of concentrated thought took little heed; their temples were plain; numerous Zennists were great devotees of the beauties of nature. And thus the Zen type of painting consisted, not in studies of deities and angels, but in landscapes wrought just with Indian ink on a yellowish ground, the draughtsmanship being always of a bold, simple kind. The Zennists first became numerically strong in Japan at the beginning of the thirteenth century, when militarism was growing widespread with the upper classes. And at that time it was from the sword-bearing aristocracy, that the Contemplation Church principally gained its adherents. Inculcating, as it did, self-discipline, it perforce appealed to the hardy men-at-arms. It was partly if not largely through their pre-occupation with Zen, that the warriors learnt to commit suicide calmly by the awful way of disembowelment. And it was the destiny of Yoshimasa, and his circle, to uphold a gentler side of Zen teaching than that reflected by this readiness for a gruesome death.

Political events inhibited the speedy passing from China to Japan of the Zen mode in pictorial art. With the fall of the Sung dynasty, China became a province of the huge empire of Kubla Khan, whose abortive invasion of Japan resulted in that country's ceasing to have intercourse with her continental neighbor. In 1368, however, the Chinese throne passed back to native kings, whereupon Japan and China resumed their ancient friendship. In 1370 a Chinese priest, Josetsu, received a charge at Sokokuji, a Kyoto temple of the

Zen Shu. He was a painter in the plain Zen style, which had been prominent in the Sung days; and he commenced to give at the Kyoto temple, lessons in art of that description. With his death, Sokokuji remained a stronghold of such art, laymen besides churchmen going there for tuition in handling the brush. It was of Sokokuji, that Yoshimasa himself was a member. Whence it was to be expected, that the gifted people he gathered round him, after his abdication, were mostly men who were, or had been, associated with that fame in Kyoto, and were imbued with Zennism in its gentler aspects. Of these men were Sesshu, Kano Masanobu, and his son, Kano Motonobu, the first being still regarded by Nippon as her supreme master in the monochromatic landscape or bird-piece. And it was in the simple mode of pictorial work, that the Kano pair won their laurels.

Although tea was known in Japan in the eighth century, if not still earlier, in Yoshimasa's day it had not yet much favor in the country. But among the Ginkagu coterie was Shuko, who had good reasons for having a high opinion of tea-drinking. He was, for a while, priest in a temple near Osaka, losing his position because, being over inclined to sleepiness, he was found guilty of neglecting his duties. And it was after this dismissal, that he came in contact with Zen teaching. At a remote date some of the Zennists in China were wont to enact a sort of Communion Service, in which they drank tea with great solemnity, the one bowl being passed round. Shuko traveled for a time in China, where, perhaps, he saw this Service. He discovered that tea helped him to fight his trouble of drowsiness, and was thus an aid to the long religious meditations, the concentrated thought which Zen demanded. He grew eager that many Japanese, besides himself, should know the value of tea in this relation. In his desire to popularize the beverage, he was quite conceivably influenced by the fact that his old friend Sesshu, was somewhat addicted to alcohol. Aware, as Shuko was, how keen an appeal is made to the Japanese mind by formalities, he sought to bring tea-drinking into vogue, by giving it a quaintly formal character. Yoshimasa approved, and hence it was at Ginkagu there was inaugurated, the Cha-no-yu, or Tea Ceremony. What was the tenor of the code at the tea-parties there?

Narrow is the way which leads to the goal of the Buddhists: the state which Cakyamuni called "supreme, perfect enlightenment." For it is written, in the Scriptures of the Light of Asia, that to allow oneself to be worried is a sin, a barrier on the path to enlightenment! And doubtless, it was with this text in mind that Shuko

laid down, as one of the laws of the Cha-no-yu, that all those assembled must ever be imperturbable, invariably courteous. Even as the Zen Shu linked itself with a simple style in painting, so also it was ordained that the utensils at the tea-parties should be plain though beautiful. There were self-colored pottery bowls; there were lacquered jars in pure black. It was prescribed just how the guests should gather, just how the host should receive them. And since to ban smoking would have been quite impossible at a Japanese meeting, there were exact regulations concerning the way in which ashes should be knocked from a pipe. No gossip was allowed; none might broach the topic of politics. Conversation must turn exclusively on art and religion.

In the Orient, the charming little art of floral composition had a religious origin. The Buddhist saints were, in a sense, heralds of Darwinism, for at a far-off day some of them were wont, after storms, to garner in the flowers which had suffered, and put them in water. This was done, because it was held that whatsoever things have life are possessed of the seed of Buddhahood, the possibility of evolving to the enlightened state. And the flowers were viewed as being thus endowed. In the thirteenth century, a Japanese prelate, Nichiren, wrote an essay on this form of evolution. And there is a reference to it in *Kumasaka*, a drama with passages of high beauty. Its title a personal name, the piece was written in Yoshimasa's time: and one of the characters observes with tense seriousness, that he believes prayer can be heard, even for the grass. This attitude to the plant world was notably strong with the Zennists, in some measure underlying their love of the beauties of nature, the sentiment which begot their remarkable pre-occupation with landscape-painting. Wherefore, it is anything but surprising that the arranging of flowers was an important factor in the life of the *Gin-kagu* circle. It is they who are pointed to in the East, as having brought floral composition to recognized status as an art, duly possessed of a name, the thing being known henceforth as *Ikebana*, or *Living Flower*. There is great significance in the term, moreover. For if in the West there are people who indulge in profuse, ostentatious display of flowers, it was the opposite of this plan which was loved by Yoshimasa and his intimates. True Zennists that they were, their aspiration was to adorn the room with one little bouquet, exquisitely put together. They aimed at giving it an air of the completely natural, in consonance with which ideal the blossoms were always put in the plainest receptacles. Mr. Mount Higashi was the

first Japanese to set his floral arrangements in a vase, whose outside was but a straw basket. He was the first Japanese to use vases, which were no more than bamboo tubes.

One of the Ginkagu circle was Soami, a painter in the Zen mode, who gained wide celebrity in landscape-gardening. And it was he who helped Yoshimasa to lay out his little domain. It is the fairer through the presence of water; a lakelet, artificial presumably, laps at the very base of the houses; and sundry parts of the garden have lovely names. There is the Vale of the golden Sands; there is the Bridge of the Pillar of the Immortals; there is the Rock of the Mountain Fairies. And in at least one case, the nomenclature has religious inception; for a part of the garden is called the Gate of the Dragon, being the name of a glen in far China, sacred through its Buddhist rock-sculptures. Mr. Mount Higashi sometimes himself took a role, in performances or No dramas. And although it seems that the game, quaintly entitled *Ko Awase*, or Listening to Incense, was known in Japan before his day, it was he and his friends who, with their fondness for the pastime, originally brought it into prominence. The host, taking sticks of perfume and lighting each for an instant, gave it a number. Then he lit them in a fresh order, competitors being challenged to tell from the aroma which stick was being burned. And they were expected to give the aroma at issue an appropriate designation, by preference one embodying an allusion to classical Eastern literature. If the little muster of art treasures at Ginkagu cannot have been wholly formed by the ex-Shogun, for it includes pictures wrought later than his times, it is largely composed of things in the unpretentious manner which the Zennists adored. And consequently these works harmonize to perfection with the guise of the rooms, never one of them showy, each refined. There is a painting by Soami; there is one by Motonobu; there is one by Sesshu. And the grand portrait-sculpture of Yoshimasa shows him in sacerdotal robes; for in 1485 he culminated his quest for an escape from life, by entering the clergy of the Rinzai branch of the Zen Shu.

Tradition maintains that Mr. Mount Higashi was himself an artist, and that the sculpture of him is of his own fashioning. It depicts exactly the face normally looked for, considering the story of the man, the face of a dreamer. And it certainly cannot have been a worldly motive which prompted him to take ordination vows; for the Zen priests were long thought of in Japan as a very emblem of extreme poverty. It does not seem to be known whether the Rev.

Ashikaga Yoshimasa ever officiated in his hieratic capacity. But he bequeathed his forestbound home to the Contemplation Church, to make of it a hall of prayer, so that the place, still showing though it does the mere guise of a manor, is spoken of now as Ginkaguji, this suffix "ji" meaning fane. The ex-Shogun died in 1490, and he was buried at the Zen temple of many memories, Sokokuji, Kyoto. If he had lived in an epoch of peace, when the Japanese treasury was full, he would no doubt have earned fame as one of those very few potentates who evinced sharp discrimination in art. As time sped on, people would have ceased to recollect the unduly lavish spending which marked him in his Shogunal days. They would have forgotten this fault in admiration for his true interest in high beauty, and for his efforts to foster it. Under those circumstances, however, the world would have been poorer, through lacking the spectacle of the effect of Zen philosophy on an unfortunate person, vanquished, talented, devout. There would have been missing the little sidelights on Buddhism, which are formed by the doings of the Ginkagu coterie.

Which is the more valuable aspect of Zen teaching? Is it the martial side, reflected by the spartanism of those men-at-arms who were members of the Contemplation Church, the marvellous fortitude with which many of them went to a terrible death by their own hand? Or is it the gentler side, mirrored by the love of nature with the Zennists, their zest in landscape-painting, their passion for flowers? Few are the people who have not dire need, often, of courage to face physical suffering; and a sound religion is that which engenders nerve. Nevertheless, the Zennism which taught men to disembowel themselves is not one which will endure. And to repeat, are there not lessons of eternal value among those taught at the Silver Pavilion?

If it was only too long a while, ere the robber barons of Japan truly felt those lessons, surely Cha-no-yu, and Ikebana and Ko Awase, each of which gradually increased in favor after Yoshimasa's day, all played their little part in making the life of the Japanese nation eventually so exquisite. It was in no idle moment that tea-drinking was encircled by a code of ceremonial, which stipulated even the way in which ashes should be knocked from a pipe. For there is a close relation between formalities and consideration for others than one-self, good manners in the true sense. And why is it that, of people in Nippon today, the humbler folk are those who chiefly show such consideration? Why are they the real ladies and

gentlemen of the land, if not because, in much greater measure than the so-called upper classes, the lowly ones are still under the power of the old Japanese civilization? As years went forward, after Mr. Mount Higashi's defeat and passing, the refinement which had marked the Japanese aristocracy, in the remote pre-Shogunal day, was not only revived with that class, but was also disseminated among the masses. The Tea Ceremony grew more elaborate still, and a form of symbolism entered into it. A host, making ready his tea-room, would decorate it in a way which he deemed suggestive, adorn it with this or that, calculated to evoke visions of the same thing, on a larger scale. For example, if he selected water-flowers for his single bouquet, his dream was that the guests, on seeing the garland, should suppose themselves viewing a wide marshland, fair with many blossoms. He or she is a curiously fortunate person, who does not stand in terrible necessity, often, of an escape from sorrow by an imaginative flight, as this at the Cha-no-yu, or as that which enabled the Ginkagu circle to perceive, in the aroma of a given incense-stick, something which might be appropriately defined by an ancient Chinese lyric, or a text from the Buddhist Scriptures. Pacifist in an epoch of bloodshed, Yoshimasa reminded men that it is wise to find leisure for friendship, and the interchange of ideas on art and religion. What R. L. Stevenson calls the "love of lovely words" was nurtured by the ex-Shogun, in naming the various parts of his garden; and he helped to demonstrate that much may be beautiful though simple. Is it his prime glory that he stressed that truth—which is the same yesterday, today and for ever—that the finest things in life are not to be bought for gold?