The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by Edward C. Hegeler

VOL. XLI (No. 11) NOVEMBER, 1927 (No. 858)

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The Open Court Publishing Company

Wieboldt Hall, 337 East Chicago Ave., CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Per copy, 20 cents (1 shilling). Yearly, $2.00 (in the U.P.U., 9s. 6d.)

Entered as Second-Class Matter March 26, 1887, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under Act of March 3, 1876

BUDDHIST FESTIVAL "WORLD RENUNCIATION"

Frontispiece to The Open Court.

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THE AESTHETIC PHILOSOPHY OF JAPAN

BY W. G. BLAIKIE MURDOCK

FEW countries have created so much which is beautiful as Japan. It is widely supposed in the Occident, that in the fine arts she has never risen above the merely charming. It is common with Western people to speak of her, as being great in small things, nevertheless small in great. But if indeed, in the sphere of works which are frankly slight in inspiration, and tiny in dimension, Nippon has reflected a skill which has been unrivalled by other lands, she has by no means failed in the epic strain. It is in her castellated architecture, her old Buddhist paintings and sculptures, her chronicles of war and her dramas, that she has triumphantly soared to the heights. These are exploits, which as yet are little known in America or Europe. And, since so rich an achievement has been Japan's, a quite phenomenal interest pertains, to what the Japanese themselves have written in art criticism. Has the work of the Island Empire, in this field, been worthy of the fair things involved?

Scanning the West besides the East, it is soon perceived that a difference of the widest lies, between the two main classes of critical writing. There have been men who were apparently content, to hurl maledictions at what they considered bad, and to accord ecstatic eulogies to what they regarded as good. They dilated on glorious color, in music or painting; they expatiated on superb rhythm, in verse or sculpture. And prominent among critics of this variety, perhaps its very symbol, was Théophile Gautier. For if he wrote scarcely a phrase which is not engaging, he wrote hardly one which offers mental food. The writers of this description are only a little way removed, from those journalists of the daily press,

whose trade is to pass speedy verdicts on current books and pictures. But there have been men who, far from being satisfied with giving praise or blame to individual works, have made of criticism a form of philosophy. They have pondered on the enigma, which is constituted by the existence of art in the world, as mysterious a thing as the existence of mankind. They have given zealous meditation, with regard to what are veritably the bases of beauty, be it in lines or colors, words or notes. If Coleridge is the acknowledged high-priest, in criticism of this deeper and more speculative sort, if Schopenhauer touched it well furthermore, there come to mind also in this relation, the names of Goethe and Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater and Mr. Arthur Symons. What manner of philosophic ability, then, was shown by the Japanese critics of the arts?

Scion of a noble house, Ki no Taurayuki (833-946) was in the civil-service of the government. Like many if not most of the Japanese nobility of his time, he was acquainted with the Literature of China, where speculations on beauty had been written, long prior to his day. But if it is probable, that Ki derived from Chinese writings of that class, some of his ideas on aesthetics, he would appear to have been the earliest Japanese, to engage in writing in that sphere. He was himself a lyric poet, striking in his verse sometimes, an intensely strong note of human interest. In 905, he began to compile an anthology, *Kokinshu,* or Old and New Poems; and it is the preface by him to this book, which enshrines his critical beliefs.

The anthologist is severe on the versifiers of his own epoch. He says that their way as a rule is, rather to intend poetry than to achieve it; he speaks of the writings of some of them as "mere decoration"; and he compares those writings to a plant which bears no grain. Of a poetess of a little previous to his time, he observes that she has paths but not power; of two authors who also lived before him, he declares that the one shows deep emotion, yet lacks skill in wording, whereas with the other, the case is exactly the reverse. In his pages on poetic art in general, he speaks of song having been called forth, through the hearts of men overflowing, merely at the joy of being alive. He goes on to bring forward, as among the things which have evoked poetry, "the murmur of the cicada, recalling sorrowfully the memory of an absent friend", or the feeling of "sadness, because young girls grow up". Beyond doubt, the Japanese, as a nation, have a signally keen zest in the beauties

of nature. Whence it is not surprising to find, that Ki gives as being of the sources of poetry, "Joy in the loveliness of flowers, wonder at the notes of birds, tender welcome of the mists of Spring-tide". And having cited further things akin to those, he tells that people found it brought composure to their minds, to fashion verses on such themes.

Apparently nothing is known about Yoshida Kenko (1283-1350), save that he was a Buddhist priest. He lives by his *Tsure Dzure Gusa,* or Gleanings from Leisure, a volume of tiny essays on a wide variety of themes. And, as is normal in a book of that kind, there is a good deal of disclosing of the writer's ideas about the arts. Music is of those which he speaks about, and he quotes the words of one, Kagemochi, who would seem to have been a flautist: "You must add a little natural ability to what you have been taught about each stop, and put your heart into it as well". Talking of the poets of long ago, he eulogises their simplicity of phrase, with the consequent ease in understanding them, and he extols their depth of purport. When put into poetry, even the toil of the humble dweller among the mountains becomes beautiful," he says. The character of the Japanese language, with its curious if not unique demand for brevity in wording, has conduced to make the literature of Japan full of things which are hints, rather than statements. Speaking of religious sculpture, Kenko praises a certain carver of Buddhist images, "because his knife did not cut perfectly". And seemingly, what the writer desired to hint at there, is that fine work in the glyptic art is not very highly finished, but has a little roughness, as in a thing of nature's own fashioning.

It was in the 14th century, that there commenced the writing of the plays, whose generic name is *No* or Accomplishment. And it was notably these pieces which were meant, when it was said at the outset of these present pages, that her drama is of Japan's high triumphs. Kwanze Motokiyo (1375-1455) was in likelihood, the most fecund writer of *No* works; and he wrote a treatise on this art which he practiced, *Seami Jurokuhi Shu.* It is his complaint, that there are many people who attend *No* performances, yet see only the externals, instead of grasping the inner significance, the things which are adumbrated. For knowledge of the kind which can be gained through the eyes, he adds, "comes not to all who see, but to him who sees well". Motokiyo speaks of the very great difficulty, of handling ably in a play, a subject which has not been

treated in dramatic literature before. He reminds playwrights, that to attain the terrifying is not necessarily to achieve the beautiful, for the two "are as far apart as black and white". In consonance with this advice, he adds words of warning, with regard to those plays in which a child is depicted, the critic saying that, in these cases, there is the danger of making the audience feel, that their emotions are being unduly assaulted. The perfect actor, he observes, is he who can please alike the learned and the uneducated. And he stresses the need of high moral character, in those who would play well in *No*: "Venery, gambling and strong wine are strictly forbidden."

The decoration of swords was among the things, carried to an extraordinary height of loveliness in Japan. Whence such art attracted a good many critical writers, the best of whom, perhaps was Inaba Michitatsu. Himself a dealer in weapons, he lived towards the close of the 18th century; and the book by him is *Soken Kisho,* or Treatise on Sword-Furniture. Of one artist he declares that his creations remind "of white rails scattered over the broad bosom of the ocean, their outlines softened by the mists of Spring." Of another he maintains, that his work calls up the feeling which is known when, 'on an autumn evening, looking out under the blinds from the upper floor in a tall, riverside house, there is seen the rising of the moon." He praises a further man by reason of his art reflecting "that noble elevation of tone . . . which can never be imitated". He echoes these words when, dealing with art in general, he says that "the sculpture of a genius . . . is invariably permeated by a lofty spirit." Touching on the financial side of his topic, he expresses scorn for the artist who is always thinking about the reward which his work is to bring; and he adds that the true master "forgets all about bread-winning, through devotion to his art". He speaks against supposing, that the value of works of high beauty can be estimated in figures. And he asserts that, for a person to grow absorbed with the getting of money is to become the mere slave of the same.

If it may seem to some people, that Michitatsu's eulogies of sword-decorators are a little fantastic, it must be remembered that the work of these men, in endless cases, was definable less as sculpture in miniature, than as pictures executed by carving and inlaying. It was about the time *Soken Kisho* was written, that there began the prodigal output of color-prints, of Japan's exploits the one, which

nowadays enjoys the widest familiarity. The prints were frequently issued in the form of Albums, and of such was *Yehon Mushi Yerabi*, or the Picture-Book of Selected Insects, by Utamaro (1754-1806). He is among the most exquisite of Japanese pictorial artists, and in this book by him there is a preface by Toriyama Sekiyen, who was personally a print-designer. He talks here of Utamaro having contrived, to make the glitter of the firefly seem a reality. And, maintaining that pictorial art consists in rendering the heart of things, he claims that this is what the master has done, with the insect world.

The vast stream of color-prints, which flowed from the press as the 18th century passed into the 19th, was accompanied by nothing less than a torrent of prose fiction, and a writer of such was Ryutei Tanehiko (1783-1842). In the introduction to his story, *Ukiyogata Rokumai Byobu*, or Episodes of the Passing Hour, shown on Six Screens, there is an assault on the other novels of the author's time. He wisely attacks the predilection which they display, for handling the horrible, the supernatural, the surprising; and in his own story aforesaid, he practices what he had preached as critic, his pages being concerned with ordinary, domestic happenings. Tanehiko is the more interesting, because he was a close friend of the most widely distinguished of all Japanese, Hokusai. The novelist contributed a foreword, to the 11th volume of the album by that master, *Mangwa*, or Spontaneous Sketches. And, in this memento of a friendship, Tanehiko exalts those artists, "who adhere strictly to the . . . rules laid down by the old masters." It is those who adhere thus, he contends, who "succeed in delineating flowers, so as to make their beauty actually present, and in representing snow, so as to make us almost shudder with cold." Hokusai can do this, he exclaims, adding: "He knows how to get at the essence of whatsoever things he puts on paper, and he has the gift of conveying their significance, to those who scan his productions."

Another great admirer of Hokusai was Shikitee Samba (1757-1822), he too being a novelist. He wrote the preface for the 7th volume of *Mangwa*, which section of the album is composed of landscapes. And Samba tells here, how he saw "the beauty of flowers, the glory of autumnal woods, the gleam of winter's snow," how likewise he even heard the crashing of a waterfall; and then he awoke, for he had but been dreaming with *Mangwa* under his pillow! At the age of 75, Hokusai, still full of mental vitality, himself

enunciated some ideas about his art; and he said that, if only he was allowed to live to 110, he would reach so high a proficiency, that his every line or blot would be alive. Among the Japanese landscapists, it was few if any who rivalled the last of the great print-designers, Hiroshige (1797-1858), of albums by whom is *So Hitsu Gwafu,* or Speedy Sketches. And, in the 2nd volume of this book, there is a foreword by Honcho Gosamma, whose identity does not appear to be known. "The views," he says, "are true to nature, nevertheless so lofty in conception, that they make us feel like denizens of some other world."

It is greatly common, with those Western writers who descant on the art of Nippon, to assert that the artists knew aims and outlook, widely other from those of their Occidental brothers. But the foregoing passages, culled so as to give a representative idea of the tenor of Japanese criticism, are of the last value as demonstrating the affinity between Eastern and Western convictions with regard to high beauty. Motokiyo's statement, that fine moral character is needful in men, ere they can achieve great things in *No*, echoes the saying of Milton, that whoso would write a noble poem must be a noble person. Nor is it difficult to conceive a phrase, exactly analogous with that one by the Japanese dramatic critic, emanating from G. F. Watts or Ruskin. The latter might have spoken, with Turner as his subject, the eulogy offered by Gosamma to Hiroshige. And Tsurayuki's attack on certain verse, as being mere decoration, might well have been written by some Western commentator on Swinburne. With those Occidentals, who claim that the attitude and aspirations of the Eastern artists were distinct, from those of the Western, it is frequent to contend that the painters in Japan were preoccupied, primarily with this same thing, the merely decorative. And a sharp contradicting of this contention is formed, by the words of Sekiyen, Tanehiko and Samba. If the Japanese critical pages often seem slight, it will be found time and again, on scrutiny, that their seeming slightness is that of tempered steel. It is often said, that Japan has never produced a great sage, like Cakyamuni in India, or Confucius in China, but is not Japanese aesthetic philosophy rich in the sagacious? And it was fitting, that remarkable work should be done in that little sphere by Nippon, since perhaps there never was country, creating so many beautiful things, as were fashioned by her.