

# EAST AND WEST

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Fig. 1. - A guardian of the Buddhist world. XIV C. As fiercely spiritual as were William Blake's own ghostly visitors.

## A Westerner on Japanese Art

*The article which follows, written by the distinguished artist-author Jean Charlot, came into being as a result of a recent exhibition of Japanese painting from the twelfth through the eighteenth centuries, shown at the Honolulu Academy of Arts between February 14 and March 21, 1955. Sponsored jointly by the Academy and the Tokyo National Museum (from the vast collections of which latter museum the pictures were chosen), this exhibition of « Treasures from Japan » attracted wide attention throughout the Pacific area and the United States, and was organized as the first of a series of exhibitions to be shown in Honolulu, designed to document the major aspects of Japanese art history. Permission to reproduce the illustrations accompanying the text was graciously given by the Marquis Asano, Director of the Tokyo National Museum. The Tokyo and Honolulu museums welcome this opportunity to present the interpretation of Japanese painting as seen through the eyes of a Western painter to an international public. — ROBERT P. GRIFFING, Jr., Director - Honolulu, Hawaii.*

Perhaps the most striking quality of the show of Japanese art now on view at the Academy of Arts is its diversity. One was well prepared to meet treasures, on the highest possible level of national aesthetic achievement. But it comes as a surprise that this uniformly high performance expresses such a diversity that, to find a parallel to its range in our own Western art, we should pair paradoxically the visionary watercolors of William Blake with the lithographed cartoons of Gavarni (Fig. 1-2).

Far from being for the Westerner only a curious display of exotic art, this shows intimate ties with our own modern art, for the latter would scarcely be what it is if, somewhere close to mid-nineteenth century, French genius had failed to contact Japanese forms of art. It matters little that this contact happened historically through the backdoor as it were: Manet, Degas, Lautrec, Gauguin, met Japanese art only in the folk version of the penny sheet, the colored woodcut. Yet this art that, for a Nineteenth Century Parisian, might just as well



Fig. 2. - Spectators at Kabuki theater. Hishikawa Moronobu. XVII C. Lowbrows not unlike those to be found in Gavarni's lithographs.

have matured on another planet, was enough to jolt the masters out of set Renaissance norms, and to start them on a quest of such scope that close to a century later, it has not yet settled its pace to a routine.



Fig. 3. - Illustrated biography of Prince Shotoku. XIV C. Detail: carpenters building the framework of a palace. Perspective used as textural antidote to humans.

Compare the Western portrait, planted into the center of the canvas with barbaric bluntness — bulging out for all to see — with the Japanese mode: not a bulge but a recession seems to be its approach; not the gross achievement of display, but the elusive game of understatement. Pillars, screens, cloud forms, continuously interpose their opaqueness between the onlooker and what, in the picture, goes on unconcernedly, as if the people in there did not know they were being watched (Fig. 3-4). Here, a throne room, the deep prostration of a suppliant a clue to the august presence; but only the imperial foot in its brocaded slipper is defined, and the lower edge of a golden pantaloons. The roof edge cuts out of visibility the rest of the exalted countenance, hidden further by the free forms of a low trailing fog (Fig. 5). Or look at the portrait of a famous beauty, resting inside a river pavilion, a subject-matter comparable to that of our so-called cheesecake snapshots that, in a straightforward way, often complete the lavish visual display with charts of measurements. Perhaps more alluring is the Japanese manner, where the inquiring eye is made to hurdle over successive barriers, to slide along the diagonal perspectives of timbers, on walls, floors and balconies, to glimpse through half-slid partitions the opening of a darkened room. In it is seen the edge of a mat and, just at the upper boundary of the composition where

Fig. 4. - Illustrated biography of priest Hōnen, XIV C. Humans planted in a decor of architectural geometry.

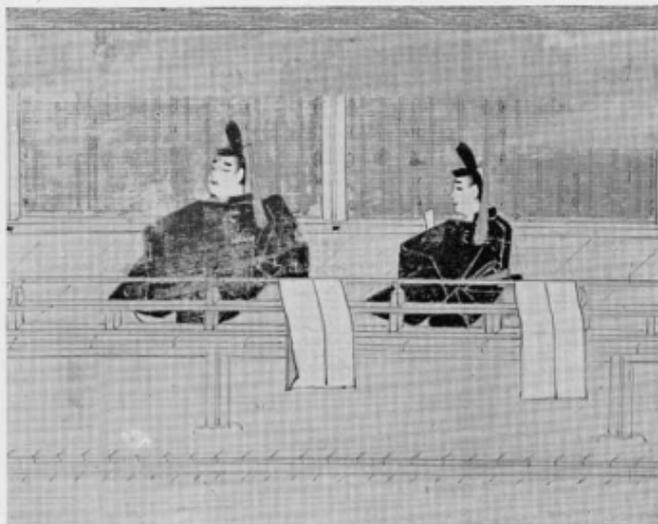


Fig. 5. - Oe-yama story Kanō Takanobu, XVI C. Tiered perspective recesses and cloud forms all but hide the imperial countenance.

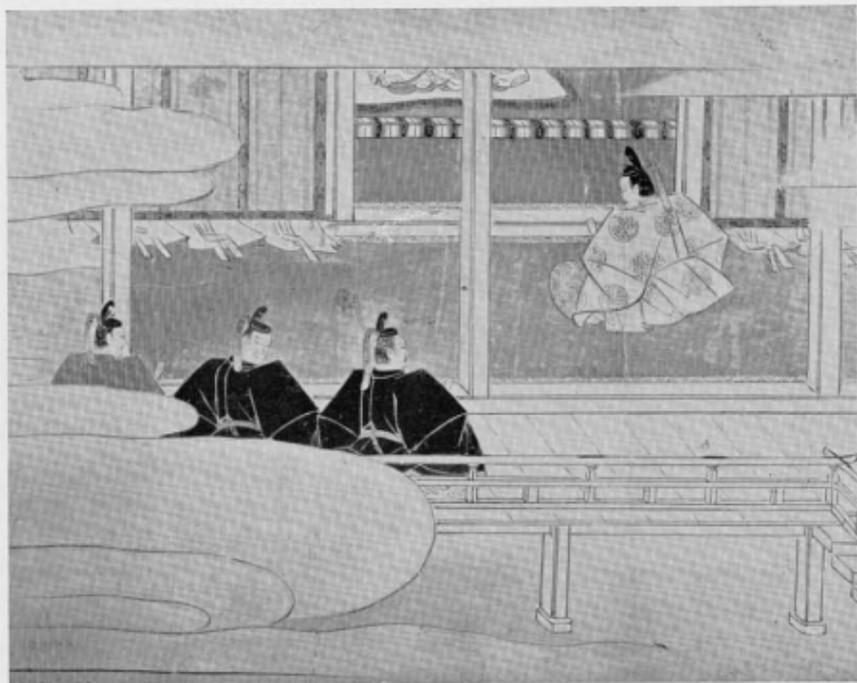




Fig. 6. - Illustrated biography of Prince Shotoku.  
XIV C.

story telling melts into visual nothingness, the folds of a kimono sleeve, a sparse strand of black hair, all we shall ever know concerning this famous beauty (Fig. 6-7).

Another facet of Japanese art would have jarred the faith of the Western masters who believed wholly in its exquisiteness. It is genre, of a sort that the French call *canaille*. In this show, it starts chronologically with a masterpiece, « Animals in Frolic », that could shame even our Disney as unimaginative (Fig. 8-9). It culminates in long scrolls positively jammed with sketches of milling lowbrows. For a Western eye, tuned still, if somewhat ashamedly, to Greco-Roman ideals, it is hard not to appraise at first these actors as some what sub-human, not to perceive emerging as a kind of double-take from behind the human bodies, the frog, the rabbit, the louse even, as a probable ancestor, nay, as a begetter. But soon one forgets, as one should, Venus and Apollo to watch with tender concern these little men asserting their humanness in a frenzy of exploding gestures, that shake the underfed ho-

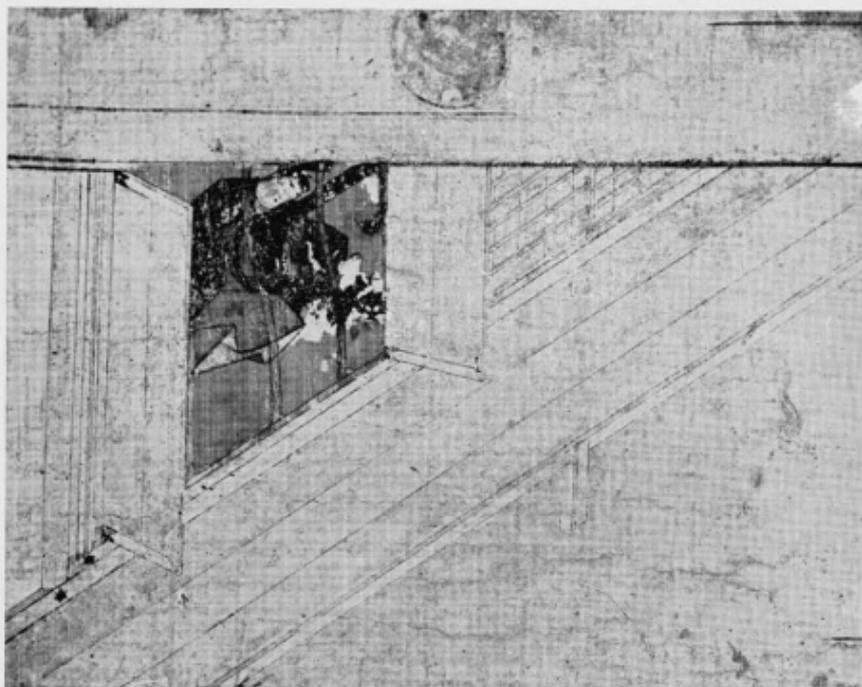


Fig. 7. - Romance of Sagamoro. XIV C. Where ruled in perspective lines are given priority over the human episode.

dies up to the very tips of their fingers spread fanwise, bent backwards in a climax of expostulations. Each is conscious to be an individual active in the drama, or comedy, that unfolds its plot as the scroll is unrolled, or unfolded the screen (Fig. 10-11).

To understand these masterpieces of expression, it may help the Westerner to look back to his own Gothic age, contemporary with the Japanese scrolls. The Eastern crowds of gesticulating lowlies call to mind the bug-like personages of illuminated books of hours, busy ants thronging at the foot of the cross, villains jostling each other to better stone the martyr, or the blessed packed tight in the bosom of Abraham. Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries stamp both Japanese and European art with the sense of human limitations without ever sinking into despondency. The Christian sense of sin and the Japanese sense of humor never mistake the little men that jam this crowded art form, with Hercules or with other supermen that, in our day and country, display their might in whiskey ads. and comic books.

Again a change of scene when, from the human crowd, we enter timelessness, a silence meant to be more pregnant than words, in the art that Zen discipline bred. These Zen saints are not of the goody-godly kind, that smiling, well-washed kind that would have one believe that attaining sainthood is but a lark. They pattern themselves after the modes



Fig. 8. - Animals in frolic. Toba Sōjō. XIII C.

of Hindu apostles, seen as rawboned, muscled and hairy, engaged in a tug-of-war with virtue as strenuous as warring or wrestling. Again, we may capture between East and West a link of thought that however tenuous may help us to understand: to the monk who, eyes squinting, attempts to thread a needle,



Fig. 9. - Same. Detail.



Fig. 10. - Travellers in autumn mountains. Yosa Buson, XVIII C. As in Toulouse-Lautrec, an aristocratic economy of means is used to describe some frolics.



Fig. 11. - In and around Kyoto. Sumiyoshi Gukei, XVII C. The texture and the smell of the human crowd.

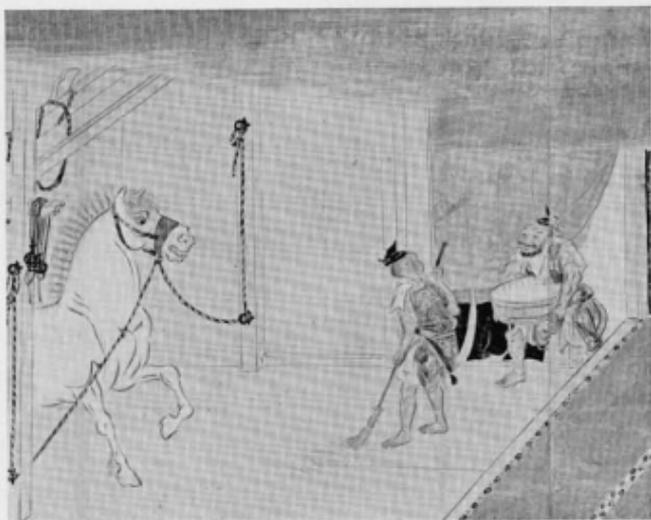
forced to leave cosmic panoramas to perform this minute action, we find a parallel in the old scholastic query how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? (Fig. 12). Here, the holy man retains his good humor, amused as much by the queer paths that his search for essentials has thrust him into, as, in the more wordly scroll displayed in the next room, is amused the stable boy gathering a pail of manure from under the heroically proportioned stallions (Fig. 13).

The leaving behind of every day appearances, including time as we know it, increases as we face the images of gods and guardians, as credible in their otherworldliness as, in our own Western art, are only too believable the fami-



Fig. 12. - Zen ascetic type. Chû-an Shinkô, XV C. Oriental parallel to the scholastic query: how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

Fig. 13. - Illustrated legends concerning the origin of Seikō - Ji Temple. Heroic stallion and laughing stable boys.



liar dæmons of Blake (See Fig. 1). Impressive are the religious images, with their grandiose scale, that makes of a mountain but a footstool for the god (Fig. 14). Yet, equally grandiose are the simple fan leaves adorned with lay motifs. Fan shapes are not free forms, not truly rid of plumb and level. But rather than frozen in the limits of a rectangle, level and plumb multiply along a circular trail that follows the complex setup of the planet itself. As the small fanshape can suggest a whole world, so the theme that decorates that shape may sum up all nature, in the miraculous shorthand that summons a scalloped autumn leaf, the tender crozier of a not as yet unfurled fern, a patch of moss, or a single blade of grass.

In another genre, the highly stylistic one of mountain landscape, the Japanese artist attempted the nearly impossible, the evocation of crags and peaks that he had never seen, unless it be in their quintessence, filtered through the brushstrokes of mainland masters. But he did meet in his own islands, that are scaled to man's scale and gardenwise, the moss, the mushroom, the blade of grass. He could hold them in his hand, dew drenched and damp smelling, size them in his heart as greater for himself than the mountains and maelstroms of another country.

Japanese art, as we are able to see it in this superb show, spans from the visions of Budd-

hism and Zen, through picturesque genre, and reaches down to the tender definition of a single blade of grass. Did any other art cover a wider span?

Jean Charlot



Fig. 14. - Kokūzō Basatsu, XIV C.