

ART

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B-2 Honolulu Star-Bulletin
Tues., April 6, 1971



At the Honolulu Academy of Arts until April 15 you'll find the Osaka Exchange Exhibition, a loan show of Chinese art of supreme quality. The names of the masters represented may be unfamiliar to most, and thus an apologue, or parable, or what have you, may clarify the unique importance of the show. Had the Mona Lisa of Leonardo da Vinci, not a re-

production but the priceless original, been featured, or had the same master's fresco of the Last Supper, miraculously detached from its monastic hall in Milan, landed on a wall at the Academy, doubtless the event would cause quite a stir in our community.

meant to feel a sort of awe, as if entering an Orthodox church and coming face to face with rows upon rows of icons, each imprisoned in precious metals and stones.

SUCH A BLATANT public display is repellent to the Eastern mind. Usually in the form of a roll or a scroll, the frail masterpiece is wrapped in a cocoon of silks and hid in boxes within boxes, away from the commoner's eye. On occasions, it is unwrapped ceremoniously for the delight of some special visitor, then lovingly wrapped again.

Only since the inroad of Western manners has a public display been at all considered, at that somewhat hesitantly. As a sort of uneasy compromise the more fragile items in the Abe collection are shown at the Academy for only a few hours and only on certain days.

On Wednesdays one may see a major masterpiece, "Portrait of Old Scholar Fu Sheng," painted in the 8th century, attributed to Wang Wei. Already it was revered as an ancient treasure a thousand years ago, when in the collection of Emperor Hui-tsung. Understandably the silk has darkened and the painted surface is scuffed. Yet this scroll remains a heroic statement, with no true parallel in the art of the West.

As Wang Wei chose to paint him, scholar Fu Sheng is far from a superman of the kind that swoops as a bird from above, clad in bluish blues and reds, torso bulging and muscles flexed.

Fu Sheng is indeed a very old man, emaciated, skeletal, his fleshless arms and legs entwined under and over a low desk that doubles

as a crutch for his feebleness.

On this desk a single item, an inkstone the worse for wear. In the gnarled hands a scroll, a classic text that Fu Sheng protected at the peril of his life from the flames of an imperial bonfire.

AS ENVISIONED by Wang Wei, Fu Sheng, his body so wasted as to be almost transparent, becomes a cipher that stands for pure thought.

At the time that the artist painted this super-sophisticated image, Merovingian tribes roamed through my small corner of Europe. Their chieftains were considered learned who could sign documents with a cross.

Charlemagne, only a shade more polished than they, was yet to be born.

There are other hurdles for the unwary besides the fact that these ancient works are physically unimpressive, being fragments of faded silk or darkened paper. Their subject matter is different, indeed antithetical, from what we come to expect of art. The West inherited from the Greek his egocentric idea of man. To antique beauty, for good measure, the Renaissance added more than a dash of sex appeal.

Never having contacted our traditions, Chinese masters felt differently. To carve solid marble into illusive flesh, as did the Greek

sculptors, could only have struck them as a gratuitous tour de force, to be dismissed as some sort of esthetic jugglery.

IN THE SAME WAY, had these Oriental masters been allowed, by a shuffling of time and space, to gaze at masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance, their reaction would have been most probably one of puzzled coolness. For their inspiration fed on quite other matters than our brand of sensuousness.

They treasured, rather, the sight of the vertiginous crags of canyons, the elephantine folds on the flank of mountains, the scars and fungi at the crotch of centenarian trees. And, above all,

they prized the nothingness of trailing fogs.

To come face to face with the Mona Lisa could have held their attention only fleetingly, as a not unpleasant episode, something like the smile of a servant girl met at the mountain inn, before one resumes his vertical ascent.

The Osaka Museum, lender of the show, asked that the pictures loaned be neither photographed nor reproduced. Thus, in deference to their stated desire, the illustrations used are not taken from items in the Abe collection. They belong to another Academy show, running concurrently, of Chinese graphic arts, woodcuts and stone rubbings.

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Stone Rubbing



Rock and Banana Plant



Pomegranate