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# THE CHINA SOCIETY

LAURENCE BINYON

## THE ART OF ASIA

*A Paper read at a Joint Meeting of the China Society and  
the Japan Society, held at Caxton Hall,  
on Wednesday, November 24, 1915*

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ORDINARY MEETING

(BEING THE FIRST OF THE TWENTY-FIFTH SESSION)

*Held in the Hall at 20 Hanover Square, W., on  
Wednesday, the 24th of November, 1915.*

At a Joint Meeting of the Japan Society and the China Society,  
H.E. the JAPANESE AMBASSADOR in the Chair, Mr. LAURENCE BINYON  
delivered a lecture on "THE ART OF ASIA."

## THE ART OF ASIA.

By LAURENCE BINYON, Esq.

THOSE of us who are interested in Oriental art have generally approached the subject from the standpoint of one particular country. At this joint meeting of the Japan and China Societies, it may perhaps be an appropriate moment for trying to see the arts of those two countries in their historical setting and background.

In this lecture I want to give you some general idea of the art of Asia. It is a vast theme, as vast perhaps as the art of Europe. In the course of an hour I cannot attempt more than the briefest outline; and you will perhaps condemn my rashness in attempting so much as that. But even in this brief space it may, I think, be possible to indicate something of the diverse elements which have formed the character of Asiatic art; to emphasize what is typical in the genius of the art of India, of Persia, of China, and Japan; to note the relation in which the arts of these countries stand to one another.

A complete survey of the field would, of course, include the monumental art of Assyria and Ancient Persia, as seen in the imposing sculptures still preserved. But of these I shall say nothing, partly for lack of space, partly also because these creations of antiquity have had no such direct and vital influence on the later art of Asia as the classic art of antiquity has had on European traditions. Roughly we may take as our starting-point a date corresponding to the Christian era.

What was the state of Asia in the first century A.D.?

The invasion of Alexander, who had passed through Persia and Bactria into the valley of the Indus, had been a momentous event. Indirectly it had brought about the creation of a strong central power in India: and the conversion of the great Indian Emperor Asoka to Buddhism was of vast importance for the history of the whole of Asia. Hellenic influence also had been brought far into the Asian Continent. It took no vital hold,



and was soon an ebbing tide. But Alexander's conquest set free a great current of various activities between East and West. Right from China to the Mediterranean stretched the high road along which the precious silks were brought by traders to the markets of Imperial Rome. The two great ports of traffic at the Western end were Antioch and Alexandria: and from these cities the fermenting ideas of the period, the new cults and religious speculations with which it was so rife, were carried by the Jews, by whom the silk trade was maintained, into the heart of Asia. During the first Christian centuries the Central Asian region was a kind of whirlpool of religious thought. The mystical doctrine of the Gnostics, as well as Christianity proper, spread from Alexandria eastward, meeting the faith of Zoroaster in Persia and the full tide of Buddhism in its outward triumphant flow from India. Mani, a Persian, attempted in the second century A.D. to form a new religion, Manichæism, fusing the vital elements of Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Buddhism into a single world-religion. And with this deep stirring of religious thought arose a manifold activity in art.

A winged angel is one of a series of lunettes painted about the third century on the wall of a Buddhist shrine built in the desert within the borders of Chinese Turkestan.\* And yet the painting is thoroughly Western in style, in feeling, in sense of form! We are reminded at once of the few remaining relics of classical painting in Europe; we are reminded of the late Greek portraits found on mummy-cases in Egypt, with their large prominent eyes and broad vigorous outline. And yet in this same shrine are painted groups of Buddha and his disciples, and scenes from the Buddha legend. Well, strange as it may seem, there can be little doubt the painter of these frescoes was a citizen of the Roman Empire—a Syrian perhaps from Asia Minor who had carried his art, derived from Hellenistic tradition, into the borders of the Chinese Empire; on one of the frescoes he has signed his name, Tita, a variant probably of the Roman Titus.

Such evidence as this might lead us, and has already led some theorists, to the conclusion that Western art, penetrating

\* M. A. Stein, *Ruins of Desert Cathay*, Vol. I. Plate IV.



so far into Asia, provided the art of that continent with material to work upon and with its first dominant inspiration.

But in truth the evidence supports no conclusion of the kind. The painter of these angel frescoes was plainly not in sympathy with the world of thought which he was commissioned to express. His treatment of the Buddha figure is entirely unimpressive. If we compare for a moment any work of the mature art of Asia with these frescoes, we can find no point of connection between them.

A like theory of Greek inspiration being at the source of Asian sculpture was propounded by various scholars when the sculpture of Gandhara was first brought to light. Gandhara was a small kingdom outside the North-west of India; and there a school of sculptors, working in a late Hellenistic tradition, attempted to create images of Buddha and his legend in response to the fervour of Buddhist faith, which, arriving from India, had seized on the people of Gandhara. But here again it is the same story. Art works from within. It may borrow externals; but it is the spirit within which moulds it. Something of bodily grace, something in the folds of drapery, remains in the Buddhist art of China and Japan as a legacy from far-off Greece; but that is all.\*

We have literary evidence that in India, as in China, the art of painting on the walls of palaces was practised at least some centuries B.C.

There still exist in India, in Orissa, paintings on the walls of a cave which date from the second century B.C.

The technique of these frescoes, with strong outline and the use of colours confined to red and black on white, reminds one of the earliest paintings known to us, the prehistoric paintings found in Spain and South-western France.

The traditions of craftsmanship in the East are fixed and persistent. Everywhere in India, in Turkestan, in China, in Japan, we find the same method of fresco-painting on lime with a strong expressive outline and clear colouring. It corresponds to what is known of the earlier type of painting in Greece itself. The presumption of an early Asiatic style of painting diffused as widely as the shores of the Mediterranean

\* Buddha (Apollo-type). Lahore Museum.





BUDDHA. (Lahore Museum.)



AJANTA FRESCO: THE ANTELOPE LEGEND.

is one that is likely to win general acceptance. It was from this primitive style, we may presume, that the various countries of Asia developed each a national style of art, always, however, retaining a common base of character.

In the greatest series of early Indian frescoes which are still preserved art has become mature.

In a remote ravine among the mountains of Haiderabad a great scarp of precipitous rock sweeps in a horseshoe curve above a stream. It is a place of wild and solitary beauty.

All along the surface of the cliff the rock has been hollowed out into what are often called caves, but are really spacious halls elaborately hewn in imitation of actual structure. There are twenty-nine of these, four being churches, the rest monastery dwellings. Many of them contain paintings. These frescoes are not all of one date; the earliest are, perhaps, of the first century A.D., the latest and finest of the seventh century.

These paintings are all Buddhist in subject. We are apt to associate Buddhist art with a hieratic character, with paintings and statues of the mystical Bodhisattvas, apparitions from the supernatural world; with an art that has no concern with the actual and the visible. But the most characteristic of the Ajanta frescoes have for subject the stories told of the lives of the Buddha in his previous incarnations on earth. And so we find portrayed before our eyes the actual life of India of that time.

Here in a palace-interior,\* where pillars of deep red are crowned by capitals of pale blue marble, a prince is seated receiving offerings from young girls. How full of natural grace and courtesy are their attitudes and movements! We have no need to make excuses for a primitive stage of art. All is largely designed, with an easy mastery over the means of representation. Others again are outdoor scenes. There is a scene from the story which afterwards wandered to Europe and became the well-known legend of St. Hubert,† the huntsman who followed a stag which turned to show him a crucifix planted between its antlers. In the Indian story it is a certain king, frantically enamoured of the chase, who pursues a deer

\* *Ajanta Frescoes*, published by the India Society, Plate XIII.

† *Ibid.* Plate VIII. A few reproductions are here given by permission.



headlong, leaving his courtiers behind him, till he falls into a pit full of water which he had not noticed in his haste. The deer takes pity on him and pulls him out, and so transforms his nature. The freshness and animation of this scene, with its thickets of green so admirably suggested and the many moving figures, remind one of paintings by Pisanello. But the all-embracing tenderness of Buddhism, its recognition of the dignity and patience and beauty of the life outside humanity, gives to these scenes an atmosphere very different from that of any mere hunting scene. The deer itself is the being who was afterwards to be born as the Buddha.

Another story is of the great white elephant, also an incarnation of the Buddha.\* Owing to a spite conceived in a former existence, a young queen desired to rob this king of elephants of his tusks, and sent a hunter to procure them. The hunter, after surmounting incredible obstacles, found his victim, but was unable to saw off the tusks himself. The elephant then took the saw in his trunk and cut them off himself, knowing why and for whom the thing was done. The prize was brought home to the queen; but she, at last perceiving her own littleness of soul and the Buddha's magnanimity, turned away in shame from the sacrifice she had thought to enjoy, and allowed herself to die. The group of the dying queen surrounded by her attendants is one of the most beautifully conceived in this whole series of frescoes, or, indeed, in the whole of Indian art. Note, too, the masterly drawing of the elephant.

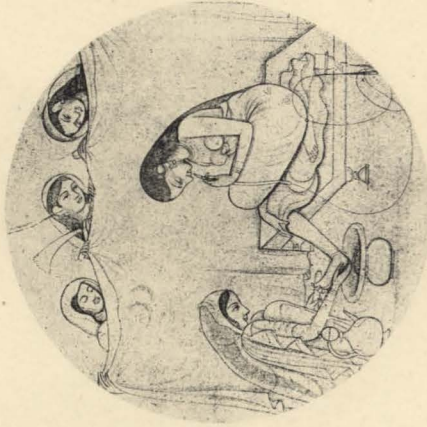
The characteristic spirit of compassion flowing out for all living creatures, which gives a singular gentleness to all these scenes, a gentleness felt even in the drawing of the figures,—this spirit finds its culmination in a superhuman figure which is the supreme expression of the art of Ajanta. No one certainly knows whom this figure is intended to represent; whether Gautama renouncing the world, or the great Bodhisattva, the genius of compassion, Avalokitesvara, who is said to refuse salvation till the salvation of the whole world is accomplished. Of superhuman size, among a confused

\* *Ajanta Frescoes*, Plate XXVII.

† *Ibid.* Plate XI.



AJANTA: THE ELEPHANT LEGEND.



INDIAN DRAWING.



AJANTA: THE ELEPHANT LEGEND.



multitude of smaller shapes, variously occupied, and a background of rocky ledge and tree, this great form stands out detached as a spirit looking down in pity on all the world. If not famous yet, this figure should be famous among the great creations of art, as nobly expressive and as pregnant with mysterious meaning as the colossal forms of Michelangelo.

In these Ajanta frescoes we find an abounding and inexhaustible delight in life—in the beauty of form and movement in men and women and animals, in the freshness of leaves, in the earth and the sunshine. And yet in the midst of this joyous exuberance, the natural vigour and hope of youth, there is the capacity for profound sorrow and an exalted compassion. The secret of this art is a deep recognition of the spiritual element in man, conceived not as an essence apart, to be cloistered and protected from the material world, but as something pervading and refining all the actions and events in which men and women take part, and colouring with its own tinge even the unconscious life of Nature.

These frescoes have the same kind of significance and promise for the art of Asia that the early Italian frescoes have for the art of Europe. If inferior in some aspects, especially in design, they are superior in one aspect: they are not so exclusively occupied with human figures, they admit refreshingly the world of animals and vegetation. Animals and birds are painted with more mastery because with more sympathy and insight.\*

(I have been permitted to show on the screen these illustrations, which are taken from Lady Herringham's copies of the frescoes, now lent by the India Society to the India Museum at South Kensington. The India Society has just published a magnificent series of reproductions.)

From a morning of such magnificent promise what might we not expect? But alas! the story of Indian painting so nobly begun drops into centuries of total darkness. No doubt the practice of painting continued: it reappears again in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; no doubt there has been immense destruction by the Mohammedans; but for close on a thousand years, so far as anything is known at present, we

\* *Ibid.* Plate XX.

have an astounding gap and silence. Buddhist art was not to die; it was to flourish exceedingly in Central Asia, in China, in Japan, in Tibet. But in the land of its birth it died out.

Some writers have professed to find in the frescoes of Ajanta traces of Chinese and Persian influence. If such be recognised they are so little important as to be insignificant. Chinese art of the same period was, as we shall see, of a quite different character of drawing and design. Certain of the figures wear a Persian dress. But we really know almost nothing about contemporary Persian painting. Persia under the Sassanian dynasty, which was overthrown by the conquering Arabs in 642 A.D., had probably a flourishing art. The decorative designs which it preferred, largely influenced the textiles of Central Asia; and the products of Sassanian craftsmanship were prized in China and Japan; but of the figure painting of the period nothing has survived. Persian painting, as we know it, begins in the Middle Ages, after the conquest of Persia by the Mongols. To that we shall come later. Meanwhile, let us linger for a few moments in India. A few specimens from Ajanta will serve to show what the Indian genius could achieve in painting. To supplement these I have chosen two or three examples of Indian sculpture; and though these are but a mere indication, they may illustrate something of the character of the art and of what, at its best, it could achieve.

There is now in the India Museum in London a beautiful torso carved in red sandstone.\* Its date is doubtful, but it belongs to a very early period. It represents a young hero, possibly the prince Siddartha who was to become the Buddha. The beauty of this torso is different from the beauty of a Greek marble, though there is a resemblance of quality, and a like sense of the grace of vigorous youth. But it has a kind of aroma of spiritual rather than bodily charm, mere torso as it is; and so in some ways it seems more allied to mediæval sculpture. After all, such reminders only bring out the truth that this is work unique of its kind. It is akin to the art of Ajanta in its inspiration; vigorous but gentle, it seems to express the grace and poise of a spirit neither withdrawn from

\* Coomaraswamy; *Eleven Plates representing Indian Sculpture*.  
*Ibid. Visvakarma.*





AJANTA FRESCO (see p. 6).



TORSO, in the India Museum (see p. 8).

the delights of the world and disgusted with the mortality of man nor, on the other hand, immersed in the life of the senses. Of a classic purity of style, noble and restrained in contour, it shows in the restricted but rich ornament the germ of an Indian tendency to decoration, afterwards to become extravagant and heavy.

Another specimen of classic Indian sculpture is a relief, cut deeply from the rock, in Ceylon ; it is probably of the seventh century, coeval with the latest and finest of the Ajanta paintings. It is the figure of a famous sage, Kapila, who was gifted with supernatural powers, seated in meditation.\* The sense of latent force, as well as of aloofness and concentrated thought, gives a strange impressiveness to this figure, combining elements of a kind to which I can hardly remember a parallel in sculpture. It is designed with great grandeur, the pose of the outstretched arm is a magnificent invention. The purity of form we see here is all too rare in Indian sculpture.

The weaker tendencies of Indian art are not wholly absent even from two colossal statues of war-horse and warrior at a temple in Orissa.† The onward movement of the horse and the striding man beside it is magnificently given : the whole group is grandly and powerfully conceived. It challenges comparison with the greatest of similar works in sculpture. Yet by comparison with these we cannot help feeling that it is lacking in the finest economy of style, the style which eschews the superfluous like the instinct of an athlete. And superfluity is the great vice of Indian art, an exuberance which loses control of itself and defeats its own aims.

Most of the mediæval sculpture of India is inspired by the Hindu religion. Buddhism died out in India, but swept northwards and eastwards in a triumphant movement over Asia to Japan.

The advancing tide of Buddhism, carrying in its wake a rich store of Indian imagery, arrived at last in China. There it met a race which had already a vigorous art of its own. All representations of the Buddha legends, which the Ajanta

\* Vincent Smith, *History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon*, p. 123 ; also Coomaraswamy ; *Visvakarma*.

† E. B. Havell ; also Coomaraswamy ; *Visvakarma*.



frescoes illustrate in a character so entirely Indian, were not only treated by the Chinese artists in their own manner, but the personages were portrayed as Chinese, not only in type and feature, but in every detail of costume. This convention once fixed was adhered to and never abandoned, even in Japan. Sakyamuni has become a Chinese prince, in purely Chinese surroundings. As China became more familiar with Buddhist symbolism and with the actual images of the Indian faith brought from Khotan and Gandhara, and as the later Buddhist doctrine, with its worship of the great Bodhisattvas, began to supersede the simpler primitive teaching of Buddha, Chinese artists eagerly assimilated the forms and symbols of the conquering faith. What they borrowed was, however, always subdued to the genius and idiom of their own art.

What was the character, then, and what were the dominant features, of the native Chinese art? Apart from bronze vessels and incense-burners dating from various centuries B.C., there is very little of Chinese art surviving before the advent of Buddhism. One of the chief monuments is a series of low reliefs on a tomb in Shantung.\* These sculptures date from the second century A.D. We do not know precisely what the subjects mean. But we seem to be in presence of a race of great original energy and vitality, especially in the lowest frieze, where two figures are striking at a serpent which has seized a third and is strangling him. Above all we have the impression of mass. But the masses are never immobile and inert, there is a strong sense of movement whether actual or latent. If one had to characterise this art in the briefest manner, one might say that it was especially distinguished by the feeling for volume and momentum. This power of expressing movement and also of the volume of life within the outline of a form persists throughout Chinese art.

When we come to painting, we find another characteristic element. The Chinese write with a brush; and painting in their view is not only intimately allied with writing, but is reckoned as actually a branch of writing. We possess recently discovered letters of the first century A.D., and these indicate as much mastery of the brush as any later writing. To a people trained from childhood to write expressively and

\* E. Chavannes, *Mission Archéologique dans la Chine*, Plate LXI.



sensitively the strokes of the intricate Chinese characters, we should expect that their painting would, even in primitive times of art, show a high skill in the manipulation of the brush. The painting attributed to Ku K'ai-Chih in the British Museum may or may not be an original work; but the fineness and subtlety of the "handwriting," to use a term quite appropriate in speaking of Chinese art, are, I think, in themselves no ground for judging it to belong to a later date. Ku K'ai-Chih was a famous Chinese master of the fourth century A.D.\* Instead of the impression of mass, proper to sculpture and its material, the fine writing line on the smooth silk is used to express human character with singular subtlety and intensity. Even thus early we arrive at the sense of intimacy and refinement which only comes to a ripe art, and we feel convinced that a long tradition must lie behind work so sensitive and mature. There is no trace whatever of Indian influence in this picture or in the picture attributed to the same master which has lately passed from the most famous of Chinese collections into that of Mr. Freer. Mr. Freer's picture is of gods and goddesses, and is remarkable for its expressive rendering of swift and buoyant movement in delicate, nervous line. I think it is certain that, whether these pictures are originals or early copies, they represent the style of the fourth century. Now Ku K'ai-Chih, we know, painted Buddhist pictures. What these were like we cannot tell; but, at any rate, his art, as we know it, is essentially and entirely Chinese. The native tradition of painting in China, then, had for one of its chief characteristics a beauty of handwriting, a power of modulating the strokes of the brush and making them expressive of the artist's nature, the intensity and force of his spirit. Such an art as this readily allies itself with the instinct for communicating the sense of movement. The great draughtsmen of Europe have for the most part been distinguished by their searching grasp of structure and their power of suggesting roundness and mass. They have seconded their powers by close studies of anatomy. The Chinese recall rather exceptional artists like Botticelli, with whom the love of sinuous rhythmical line is an inborn passion, and whose

\* Makimono attributed to Ku K'ai-Chih, published by the British Museum.



instinct for representing movement became at last a mannerism. The love of movement—continuous movement—which pervades Chinese art, is the outcome of a certain attitude of mind and philosophy of life. If you wish to seize the spirit of the Chinese genius you cannot do better than read the sayings and paradoxes of Laotze, the great sage who was contemporary with Confucius, and almost of Buddha too.

The conviction that life consists of change, that without change and without movement there is no life, this conviction seems to be ever present in Chinese art, underlying even its chosen patterns of decoration.

The decorative ornament of the West is mostly of a static character. It is made up of stable forms, and relies on the principle of symmetry. Persian and Indian ornament are not essentially different from this. But Chinese decoration with its recurring motives of cloud and wave and sinuous dragons, takes the most fluid elements for its matter and imparts to its patterns a vibration as of things alive.

Indian thought, like Chinese thought, is full of the fact of change and impermanence in everything, including human personality.

But while the Indian spirit accepts the fact with resignation, and pines always for a place of rest from the endless chain of existence, the Chinese spirit seems rather to be exhilarated by the consciousness that every life is part of the streaming, ever-changing energy of the universe.

Take again this statue, produced in the Buddhist tradition, a portrait of a Buddhist saint. It follows, perhaps, Indian prototypes, but with what a difference of character! There is nothing of the Indian softness, that flaccid resignation in the forms which is so remarkable in the seated, meditative figures of Indian sculpture. Here there is a latent energy and fire which belong to the ardour of the spirit.

In this drawing,\* which is very likely a copy from a large wall-painting of the T'ang period (seventh to tenth century), the conviction of an energy of movement as the essence of life is vividly expressed. We seem transported into a world of

\* F. R. Martin, *Zeichnungen nach Wu-Tao Tze* (1913). Plates XLIV. and L.

stream and flow, where elemental creatures move untrammelled by corporeal weight, yet endowed with superhuman force. The subject is from an old Chinese folk-tale of demons that fight with animals. We talk of demonic energy; and here surely that phrase is embodied to the life. A gust of electric storm seems to sweep through the whole design, and to carry us along with it.

The next illustration is a drawing from the same series. The same peculiar power which we saw in a primitive form in the relief of the Han period is here displayed to the utmost capacity. Though only line is used, nothing could surpass the volume and momentum of these figures. And now the beasts and reptiles, carved with rude vigour by the early sculptor on the stone, are drawn with a brush of supreme mastery. Leonardo could not have surpassed them.

In comparing these with Indian drawings, we feel at once the inborn superiority of the Chinese genius for design. I mean that faculty which creates from the pictorial elements it uses an organic unity, holding the parts in equilibrium. Balance is the pivot of art, says Rodin, and in the attainment of balance the Chinese have not been rivalled by any other race. Through this balance of organic unity even the stormiest and most violent forms can be held as in a charmed repose; and this repose is what we miss most often in Indian design, grandiose and fecund as it is, and rich in particular beauties.

As Chinese art develops it gradually invents a system of spacing which is quite new in the art of the world, and quite unique, though carried out with special variations by the Japanese who inherited it.\* The next examples will illustrate my meaning better than words. Whatever China has borrowed from outside (and probably, like most original races and original talents, she has borrowed much), this genius for spacing remains her own and is of the indestructible essence of her art. It is the miraculous faculty of design, that without recourse to symbol it can take the simplest of living things and convert them from fact into idea, so that we no longer see merely the object represented, but are somehow admitted with

\* Geese. Sung Period. British Museum. (A reproduction of which has been made by Y. Urushibara.—ED.)



seeing eyes into the mystery of life itself, the something sacred at the heart of things which appeals to what is profoundest in ourselves. Something in us of which we were not conscious, far below the surface of our intelligence, comes up into the light.

With all their genius for design, which pervades the whole of their art, the Chinese did not spend themselves on abstract problems of decoration, but kept their design animated and nourished by an intimate observation of Nature. And this was not mere observation for its own sake, it was prompted by an impassioned love of all that has most power to liberate and enchant our spirits in the world without: the miracle of flowers for ever springing and fading, the passage of the moon, the purity of the snow, the airy motion of birds, the endurance and the vastness of the mountains. So the landscape art of China, in all its various phases, remains in richness and poetic depth of mood unsurpassed even now.

We feel no veiling interval of time between these typical Chinese paintings of a thousand years ago and ourselves. Of how much of European art can we say this?

How modern in spirit the Chinese paintings were so many centuries ago we shall realise if we turn to Persia.

For Persian painting really begins with the fall of Baghdad and its destruction by the Mongols in the thirteenth century. The Mongols had conquered China in the same century. All these Chinese paintings which we have been discussing were produced before that date. But now the invading Mongols brought in their wake Chinese artists, and China from that time exercised a constant influence on Persian painting. The Arab painting which existed before the fall of Baghdad is relatively of slight importance, being, so far as we know, but a timid and meagre flower that grew from the débris of classic art.

The real foundation of the Persian painting which began to flourish in the Middle Ages is less this Arab tradition than that tradition of art which had certainly been long established in Turkestan. Just as this old traditional Asian style received a special development under the influence of the Chinese genius, so on the west of Turkestan another process of development from the same or similar origin was set in motion by the genius of the Persian race. For whatever the





BIHZAD EL MIRAK, NIZAMI, 1494. (B.M.)



NIZAMI ILLUMINATIONS, 1539—1543. (B.M.)





influence of China, the creative and essential part of Persian painting is truly Persian; and the race of Iran seems always to have been gifted with a fine sense of colour, and with the instinct for design. At the back of these, however, there is nothing parallel to the atmosphere of ideas from which Indian art in its way, and Chinese art in its quite different way, were nourished and renewed. Mohammedanism condemned expressive art; and though the prohibition was not literally obeyed where the natural bent for art was strong, it acted as a sterilising influence by restricting the artist's subject-matter. The themes of Persian painting are, when not portraiture, almost all taken from romance. Visions of deity; spiritual forms and presences; apparitions of power or of pity,—these are absent from an art dominated by doctrine which forbade the imagination to play about its austere conception of the Divine Unity. Instead of these, the Persian fancy seems ever intent on thoughts of an earthly paradise.

Persian painting, as we know it, in its purest and finest form, is an art of miniature. It is small in scale, whether in the form of illustrations to manuscripts or of albums of single drawings. The drawings are often in outline of an exquisite quality, with perhaps a few touches of colour. But while the line-drawing of the Chinese is of the most varied character—now of an incredible fineness, now broad, bold, and sweeping, or again rough and jagged or violent with splintering strokes—the line of the Persian artists is suave, smooth, and clean, rhythmically used indeed, but presenting little variety of expression.

But the most characteristic Persian painting is richly coloured. And in certain qualities Persian colour is unsurpassed. Most of the paintings have been preserved from exposure between the pages of books, and retain their original lustre.

This page,\* from a sixteenth-century manuscript of the poet Nizami, is an admirable example of the art in its full maturity. As a colour-design it is superb. The sharp diagonal lines of the white tents give decision to a decorative effect that might have been too softly sumptuous, with the gold of the ground,

\* MS. of Nizami, dated 1539-1543, in British Museum.

the deep blues, the rich crimsons of hangings and dresses, the pale grey-green of the plane-trees.

At the same time we have to allow that the interest of the picture is discursive. The subject is taken from one of the most famous love-stories of the East—the story of Leila and Majnun. The two lovers were parted in youth, and while Leila is married to a rich man by her father, Majnun, in despair, forsakes his family and lives in the desert surrounded by the wild beasts, who become his friends. After some years Leila's husband dies and she sends for Majnun; but they have suffered too much, their joy is gone. Here an old nurse is bringing the emaciated Majnun to the tent of Leila. But these, the central figures, are almost lost in the animated surroundings of the scene, the groups busy about the tents, milking the goats, and preparing a meal.

The high horizon and bird's-eye view perspective of Persian painting are common to Asiatic art and to much of the earlier art of Europe. But in Persia there is no development, as with the Chinese and Japanese, in the direction of a landscape art. The study of atmosphere is unknown. The climate of Persia may partly account for this, and also the right instinct of artists working on the decoration of a page. None the less, the fact remains that Persian design after a certain period stagnates. The painters remain content with a prescribed convention, and their efforts seem wholly absorbed in getting the utmost possible richness from their chosen materials.

Accepting these narrow limitations, they achieved wonderful things. This page, by Bihzad,\* the most famous of them, who flourished at the close of the fifteenth century, shows that at times they could rise to dramatic invention. But no dramatic, no passionate motive ever so grips and possesses a Persian artist as to absorb his whole imagination. His sensuous love of beauty cannot resist filling in the accessories of the scene with just as much care and intention in every detail as he devotes to the central figures. In the great works of Chinese and Japanese painters, as in masters like Rembrandt, accessories are subdued or suppressed, the colour is limited, and the figures which create the motive of the

\* MS. of Nizami, dated 1494, in British Museum.



design are so emphasized, so dominant in the eye, that they seem to transcend the limits of the framing space, they seem alive with all the latent energies of actual men and women. No Persian painting imposes itself thus on the imagination. Everything remains within the frame, inlaid as in a lustrous mosaic. The Persian method has, it is true, its own compensations. Just as in the early pictures of Rossetti and Millais, everything is realized with a dream-like intensity. We get quite away from the conventional everyday vision; and this is always a real achievement for the painter. The freshness and glory thus brought to the eye, as of a world washed clean, with every object magically distinct and burning with clear colour, make a vivid impression of strangeness. Strangeness, remoteness from the routine of every day, that is of the essence of romance; and no art in the world is more steeped in romance than the painting of Persia.

What could be more romantic in atmosphere than a page like this, for example, where a king and his counsellor ride up to a ruined village?\* The original blazes with colour and fine gold; and we see, as with heightened faculties and in a rarefied air, the minutest details of the scene—the gazelles grazing in the doorway of the ruin, the detached fragments of painted tiles, the herons in their nest against a sky of dappled blue and white, the delicate single plants of red mallow or purple iris that border the little stream. The splendour of articulate Nature is brought home to us with a kind of intoxicating effect.

Persian painting corresponds most nearly, I suppose, to the popular conception of the East and Eastern art, founded on the gorgeous pages of the Arabian Nights. In the history of the world's art it is a kind of backwater, a magnificent day-dream; but it is a chapter certainly that we could ill afford to lose.

The Persian style and Persian example were carried into India by the Mogul conquerors, the descendants of Tamerlane. The great emperor Akbar, who died at the beginning of the seventeenth century, encouraged art at his court. Though the

\* MS. of Nizami, 1539-1543, in British Museum.

Persian tradition by this time was enfeebled and degenerate, it was taken up by the Hindus. The great majority of the Indian paintings generally seen belong to the Mogul school thus created. Classic Persian themes of romance were handled again by Indian artists; but the great strength of the school is in portraiture. No period in all history is more vividly illustrated for us in the persons of its prominent men than this. But after all the Mogul school represents a hybrid art. It is neither wholly Indian nor wholly Persian. It is happiest, perhaps, in such drawings as this, where a group of ascetics are drawn with a sympathy for the life of thought that Persian art never shows.\* But there is more living interest in the purely Indian styles which existed side by side with the Mogul school. This genuine Indian painting, the painting of Rajputana, the product chiefly of valleys of the Himalayas to which the Mohammedan conquerors had not penetrated, is still very little known. Yet it deserves our study. For here, after so many centuries which remain a blank, we recapture something of the early spirit of Ajanta, the humanity, the joyousness, the tenderness, the spirituality diffused in life itself. The themes of this art are drawn from the life of a race preserving its ancient ways and its ancient legends, above all the knightly legends of Krishna. This drawing of a youthful warrior seems to breathe the spirit of the old Rajpūt race.† It is remarkably pure in line. I have only space for one other example of this eminently happy art. Untouched by Persian influence, this Indian drawing contrasts strangely in its airy delicacy and intimacy with the extravagant, feverish effort, the loaded ornament and inchoate design which mark so much of later Indian sculpture. You will see, too, how wholly different essentially it is from Persian work. These Indian draughtsmen love to contain their figures within continuous rhythmic lines; and in this and in their feeling for the innate beauty of natural gesture and attitude they remind us of another popular art, the art of the colour-print designers of Japan.

\* Drawing in collection of W. Rothenstein, *Indian Drawings*, published by Coomaraswamy for the India Society.

† Unpublished drawing in British Museum.



It is to Japan we must now turn.

In a sense Japan owes everything to China. But it is in the same sense that the nations of the West may be said to owe everything to Judæa, Greece, and Rome. Only a race of the finest creative gift as well as the finest susceptibility could have been able to do what the Japanese have done; their art, even when most closely following Chinese example, has always in it something of native mood and fibre. That they should have kept so close to Chinese tradition for so many centuries, and yet have produced a variation so alive and so continuously and freshly inventive, proves their originality as much as it proves their unique docility. It is a superficial view which sees in a painter like Ingres only an inferior imitation of Raphael; and it is a superficial view which sees in the art of Japan only an inferior imitation of the art of China.

Even in the periods in which the main aim of Japanese masters was to emulate the Chinese they adored, there is always that spontaneous difference which reveals a creative element. I think we can feel it in this very early landscape.\* But for my present purpose I shall single out only those phases of Japanese art which are most purely Japanese.

A certain fastidiousness, a certain love of scrupulous and cleanly order, belongs to the Japanese character; we find it in their manners, their habits, their furniture, in all their workmanship, just as we feel it in this thirteenth-century portrait of a boy saint praying on the lotus.† The word "exquisite," so often misapplied, is an epithet truly applicable to the art of Japan. The faults of this character are a tendency to the smallness which often goes with neatness. The Japanese do not work under the pressure of abundant ideas and torrential emotions; they do not fall into the excess and extravagance which sometimes beset the Chinese. But their unflinching sense of style compensates in great measure for the lack of more genial exuberance. Taste with them, as with artists like Velasquez and Whistler, becomes no mere negative avoidance,

\* Waterfall of Nachi, L. Binyon, *Painting in the Far East* (2nd ed.), Plate X. (Arnold.)

† *Painting in the Far East* (2nd ed.), Plate XV.



but a positive and vitalizing factor. One might, perhaps, compare the Japanese genius in some aspects with the Latin genius, as it is shown in much of the poetry of the Romans and of the French, where a telling economy of words and fineness of handling are made to compensate for a slightness or even complete absence of matter.

Again, we must never forget that while the Chinese are a pacific people the Japanese are a martial people; and this is not without its effect even on their art. And with their high spirit goes a gay temper and a vivacity that again reminds us of France.

And in the earlier periods it is rather in the themes of war and battle that the genius of Japanese painters is most effectively disengaged. No battle-pictures in the world have surpassed those of the Japanese masters of the thirteenth century. The long rolls which they preferred were indeed signally adapted to the portrayal of the various incidents of warfare, with its shocks, alarms, and surprises. We watch the advance of haughty warriors, or, as in this fragment, see them making ready in their camp, where the ox-drawn chariots are ranged in order; we see flights of arrows from an ambush; furious onslaughts on stockades; the burning of palaces; the confused stampede of flight; the whole moving scene of war, in fact, pictured far more truly than when, as with us, a single scene must be contracted within the confines of a frame. And in these Japanese paintings the suppression of all but essentials is matched by the extreme intensity and energy of the figures. These do not strike heroic attitudes, but they are living, daring, desperate men.\*

But alongside with this martial energetic design we find an extreme delicacy, as in the illustrations to romances and scenes from voluptuous court life, where the colour is of extraordinary richness, and where flowers are drawn with the same isolation of delicate form that we find in Persian miniatures. This picture of a poetess† wandering on the hills among the cherry-blossom, the petals of which drift about her on the

\* Keion, Boston Museum, *Painting in the Far East* (2nd ed.); and Keion, *Kokka*, No. 136.

† Mitsuoki, *Kokka*, No. 45.





GEESE. (Anderson Collection,  
British Museum.)



PRINT BY UTAMARO.



PORTION OF KU KAI CHIH SCROLL. (B.M.)

air, is typical of later productions of the same school, strongly contrasting with the vivid melting impressionism of the Chinese style.

In the fifteenth century the Chinese style had captured and overwhelmed well-nigh the whole art of Japan. Sesshu and his compeers were emulating the inspired Sung masters in impassioned visions of mountains, mists, and torrents, or in figures of the great saints and sages boldly struck on to the paper by the ink-charged brush. It was a wonderful burst, a brilliant period. But I must pass over this splendid and enthusiastic revival of Chinese ideals and Chinese style, because, though it is associated with men of commanding genius, and though it is by no means to be dismissed as a mere imitation of Chinese art, I have not the space to deal with anything but what is most characteristically Japanese.

The Chinese movement lost, as it was bound to lose in time, its strength and energy. It fell off into academic routine, it lost touch with the real genius of Japan. And yet its influence remained; art could not be as if this great revival had never happened. The problem was, how to graft the Chinese strain, the Chinese largeness and depth, on to the native principles of design. The problem was most successfully solved by a group of artists whose favourite means of expression was screen-painting. Here at any rate is no smallness, no pretty elegance, such as some people imagine to be the constant attribute of Japanese art. On the contrary, a synthetic grasp of Nature, learnt from Chinese example, is in these great screens united with the utmost audacity of design and with a splendour of colour inherited from Japan's own ancient schools. In this screen by Koyetsu,\* subtle and complex as it is, how broad and bold is the design. It is as if we had a magic glimpse into the teeming breast of earth from which the flowers are tossed up in their splendour and profusion. Superb as decoration, it is also full of the essential mystery of life and growth. I do not think the world has at all yet realized what a magnificent page of art, unique in history, and of its kind incomparable, is presented by these paintings. In this school, perhaps more than anywhere else,

\* Freer Collection. *Painting in the Far East*, Plate XXXIV.



the peculiar genius of Japan flowers most triumphantly. And it has this special interest for us to-day, that it offers masterpiece on masterpiece created on the very lines which some of the latest artists of Europe tentatively, rebelliously, and as yet with no great success, are trying to pursue. These artists are not preoccupied with Nature, sitting down before a landscape and grappling with its structure, its atmosphere, its light and shade, its colour. No; they start with their own free design, leaving themselves absolute liberty in the handling of whatever elements they choose to absorb from the visible glory of the world. But they do not turn their backs on Nature; whatever natural form or appearance they seize they seek to press out of it its quintessence. And so in such a landscape as this the natural element impresses us even more vividly and powerfully than if the main elements of it were obscured by all the accident and detail involved in what is called fidelity.\*

Again in this fine screen—it belongs to a different school, but one equally distinguished by Japanese character—how the abstraction, isolation of the figures, like those on a Greek vase, throw into relief the beauty of gesture and the rhythm of movement, and how finely spaced is the whole design! This screen is one of the early masterpieces of Ukiyoyé, the school of popular art which produced the colour-prints we all admire.

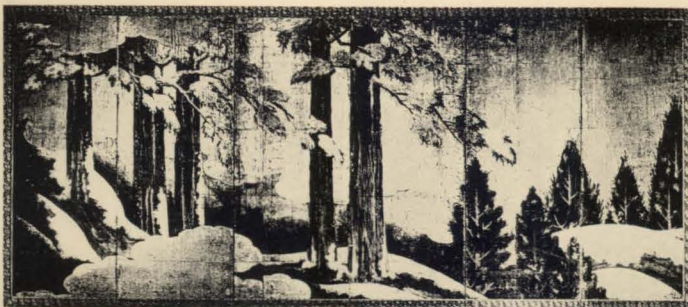
As a last example I shall show a print which has the same qualities in a high degree, the same faith in the beauty of natural action, the same expressive purity of drawing by that marvellous master of figure-design, Utamaro.†

The few examples I have been able to show you are the merest index to some of the predominant phases of the art of Asia. But they will serve, at least, to illustrate both the real relation that exists between the arts of these various countries and the inherent difference of character which has made each what it is.

The absence of the scientific spirit, which has had so potent an influence on the art of Europe since the Renaissance, the absence of this spirit and its application to all the problems

\* Yeitoku, Freer Collection. *Painting in the Far East*, Plate XXX.

† In British Museum.



SIX-LEAF SCREEN, YEITOKU. (Freer Collection.)



PORTION OF KEION MAKIMONO.



TWO-LEAF SCREEN, KOYETSU. (Freer Collection.)



of representation, is, perhaps, the source of the most obvious differences between the painting of East and West. If we take a deeper view, the essential likeness between all fine creative work becomes more apparent the more we study.

But within the art of Asia itself we note a real division. Indian art may be broadly compared with the mediæval art of Europe. It is practically anonymous. Very few names of individual artists are recorded. There are no great outstanding personalities. It is an art of popular tradition, still able, at least in architecture, to work wonders with none of the scientific apparatus and divided labour that are necessary with us. It is also, like mediæval art, pervaded by religion and the religious spirit. That makes it immensely interesting for us in an age when the popular crafts have so much died out and have lost all touch with the expressive arts. On the other hand, its limitations are very great—how great, we realize when we turn to China and Japan, where, though the crafts have remained in touch with the arts, painting has developed within itself movements corresponding to the movements in Western painting, and where a surprising amount of work that is centuries old seems modern in feeling and contemporary with ourselves. Chinese and Japanese painting touch every side of human life, every relation of the human spirit to the world of Nature.

While the art of Europe has been pored over in minutest detail, we are still only at the beginning of the study of the art of Asia. But how rich a field awaits the student—how fascinating to explore!

At the close of the lecture a vote of thanks was tendered to the Author on the motion of Mr. A. M. Townsend, Chairman of Council of the China Society.

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