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978-1-108-06137-7 - Japan in Art and Industry: With a Glance at Japanese  
Manners and Customs

Félix Elie Régamey

Excerpt

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## JAPANESE ART WORK.

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## AN ARTIST'S VIEW OF JAPAN.

“As far as one can judge, the Japanese surpass in virtue and in probity all nations discovered up to the present. They are of a gentle disposition, averse from chicanery, and very covetous of honours, which they value above everything. Poverty is a frequent condition with them, but by no means discreditable, however much attended with hardships.”—SAINT FRANCIS XAVIER.

ARE not Japanese and Chinese confounded together by the great majority of people?

This is a regrettable confusion which it is important to set right: for if it is true that the civilisation of one of them was the cradle of that of the other, yet, in fact, the physical aspect and the personal character of these two peoples present profound dissimilarities. Without pretending to set forth in full, in proof of this assertion, the long series of facts which patient and minute investigation might accumulate, I will here simply endeavour to cite a few of the most obvious and the most indubitable.

Throughout hospitable Japan, art meets the eye everywhere; it scents the air you breathe. The Japanese are proficient in the science at once of living and of painting life—*their* life be it understood, which is no more that of the Chinese than it is ours.

China is a centre as hostile to art as to strangers. The unsuspecting traveller, stopping to take a sketch of a fortress on the German frontier, is not exposed to more unwelcome treatment than if caught taking notes in the streets of Canton. I speak from experience. There is in such case no invective too coarse for them to discharge at you, just as, almost down to our own times, you might have heard our peasants cry out: “Throw away the drawings!” “Off with the pack!” Offer to a Chinaman to take his portrait, he will at once hide himself, and all in vain is every temptation to induce him to stand; the most miserable among them is proof against the most brilliant offers. To give one’s likeness to a third person is, according to their narrow superstition, to draw down on one all imaginable dangers.

In Japan—a flower-garden where all is gaiety and light and life, where everyone, from the highest to the lowest of the social scale, has a feeling more or less developed for the beautiful in nature—the artist has nothing to fear. He is at liberty to paint to his heart’s content, without awakening the least suspi-

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cion. And, no more than the painter's easel, are the photographer's materials an object of terror, such as they are on the banks of the Yellow River.

At the sight of a passing European, on whom the finger is pointed with disquieting words, the Chinese child shrieks in terror as though it were some demon going to snatch him away. In Japan, the same traveller will receive a very different reception, and the confiding Japanese baby will have nothing for him but smiles.

Chinese men, and especially Chinese women, are covered with jewellery. Japanese women do not, any more than Japanese men, wear necklaces, or bracelets, or rings, or earrings, or, in a word, any jewellery whatever "touching their skin"—a peculiarity perhaps unique in human kind.

China presents to view the most abject and revolting assortment to be found in the world of famished, infirm, and deformed people. Not to mention the lepers found grouped around the towns, how many *Cours des Miracles* might be recruited from among its population!

Nowhere does sepulchral fetichism exercise a greater empire over the minds of the people.

As everyone has the right to inter his dead as he likes and according to his means, you are continually running across some funeral monument.\* Here

\* It is to China that Japan is indebted for the invasion of cholera.

start up the decayed remains of a heavy wooden coffin on a level with the ground. There you meet the fragments of animals sculptured in stone—horses, tigers, lions, or dromedaries which of yore guarded the avenue leading to the tomb of an illustrious personage now forgotten.

In Japan it is all the other way. No one there seems to trouble his head with the destinies of *la bête*, and the people are so constituted as to take human miseries as little as possible to heart.

Thus in actual life the blind are the subjects of consideration, yet the Japanese pictures—the traffic in which is much brisker and more extensive than the Chinese, be it said in passing—often make merry at their expense.

Contrariwise, there is no example of the caustic wit of Japan exercising itself in the caricature of the hunchbacked. And for the very simple reason that, although there are many blind, there is no one hump-backed.

With the exception of blindness, infirmities are very rare in Japan; and, but for the Buddhist priests going about collecting alms, one would say that begging does not exist.

The Chinese dwelling, constructed of brick, is heavy and of a harsh appearance, always hermetically closed. The windows are swinging leaves, the doors turn upon hinges, the floor is paved. You find in the kitchen a chimney of masonry work.

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The court is enclosed by walls. The Chinese use actual beds, and, as we do, take their meals seated upon chairs.

The Japanese house, made of wood and of paper, has the amusing air of a big toy. Partitions, doors, and windows are movable and slide in grooves. Open to all comers, the habitation is as hospitable as the inmates are affable. In the way of furniture the Japanese have only boxes and *étagères*. Food is served on trays. Thick, soft mats cover the floor. Squatted thereon they sit; stretched thereon they sleep, enveloped in warm covers provided with sleeves.

Japanese costume disdains the buttons and button-holes of the Chinese. The Japanese wear sandals, the Chinese shoes. Japanese do not wear a queue, do not play cards, do not smoke opium. Finally—a still more characteristic distinction—their women, who do not cripple their feet, are free to come and go as they like; the need of guarding the women has never been felt in Japan.

Is not that enough to explain the contempt that these two neighbouring peoples have for one another?

\* \* \*

And yet for all that, we shall be told that it is from China and Corea that, along with her civilisation, Japan borrowed her principles of art and her processes of manufacture. True no doubt, especially as regards the latter.

Yet, whereas the initiators became fixed in the grooves of undeviating uniformity whence all memory of the original impulse more and more faded, the initiated, on the contrary, turning the invention put into their hands to admirable account, emancipated themselves from the narrow trammels that hindered its development and rapidly attained to the utmost limits of elegance and originality.

Thanks, then, to her incomparable faculties of observation, her infallible sureness of taste, her exquisite feeling of nature, at once so ingenious and ingenuous, the pupil, pushing the science she acquired far beyond the limits of her master's lessons, has been able to create an art all her own,—a national art.

If, moreover, we were to linger on such questions of origin, should we not have to call to mind how Persian influence, travelling by way of China, might very well, according to certain authors, have affected Japanese as well as Indian art?

\* \* \*

Contrary to the disappointment that usually follows high expectations respecting a masterpiece of art or of nature, I found on arriving at Japan only the fulfilment of my hopes. I exactly recognised the landscapes and the people the first albums reaching France had brought before my mind in 1863.

It was under a superb sky I first beheld this



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volcanic archipelago of many thousand islands clothed with luxuriant vegetation, where slender bamboos and gigantic pines imprint quite a peculiar stamp of elegance and amplitude. In truth, the pictures had told me no lies. Yes, there lay displayed before me all they had told me of the seasons and of the new decoration each brought with it, as in some fairy tale: the spring, innumerable cherry-trees in blossom, powdering with pink the undulating hills; summer, sinuous rivers, all pelted by great rain storms; autumn, maple trees displaying an infinite gamut of bright colours; winter, paddings of snow and embroideries of hoar-frost, which the Japanese go to see (just as we at home go to see the new piece of a favourite author), and do not tire admiring it.

As pertinent thereto, I cannot resist quoting two passages of a charming naïveté, as seems to me. It is M. Hayashi, one of the few Japanese that have written about their country in French, that relates them.

A servant opening the door of the house, and seeing before her the carpet of immaculate whiteness which the night had spread over the garden, cries out: "Ah! the fresh snow . . . it must not be soiled . . . where shall I throw these tea leaves?"

And this other—talking to her mistress: "I pray you, Madame, do not send me to the market this

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morning ; the little dog has flowered the court with his feet . . . I should never have the courage to confound with my sabots these designs so pretty."

\* \* \*

The theory of the influence of locality finds in Japan its perfect confirmation, and there was the proper soil for the birth of that charming thought attributed to one of her philosophers, "The smile is the source of happiness and of fortune." If that were true, the Japanese would be all rich and happy. That would be too much of a good thing. They are, accordingly, content to be a people gay, polite, and of never-failing urbanity ; to possess in a very high degree filial love, patience, order, and cleanliness. They hold that illness should disguise its deformity, that death, ignored by the living, should make as small a figure as possible. And, desiring to keep funereal affairs from intruding too much into the ordinary current of life, they affect an air of stoical coquettishness in eluding all lugubrious matters. Everyone thinks it is his duty to keep his troubles to himself and out of sight of others. Good taste suffices to impose silence on pessimistic sentiment, if indeed one could so much as suspect its existence in the bosom of such good-natured society.

\* \* \*

There was a time, if tradition may be believed,