

## OUTAMARO.



F the art of Japan has made no lasting impression upon England as to its real significance, in France a similar error has been averted by the effort of a few artists and men of letters. It is to them we owe the discovery of Japan. I do not refer here to French imitations of Japanese conventions in the decorative arts, or to mannerisms often common enough to prove that vulgarity is possible even in a country with a "live" tradition, as was the case with Japan some thirty years ago. Efforts have been made abroad that must not be overlooked to understand and class the achievements of Japanese art. If, at the present, there are serious gaps in our knowledge, if much that passes to-day will be set aside to-morrow, modern research has at least brought us thus far. It is now more than thirty years since some coloured prints, rich and strange in tone, excited the attention of a few—among them Edmond de Goncourt. We owe to him the picture of Outamaro in a monograph that places all subsequent admirers in the writer's debt, and from which only generalities and minor inaccuracies may be removed by subsequent research, leaving to him, nevertheless, the first shadowing forth of an artistic personality that is at once definite and elusive, limited yet suggestive, troublesome to the dunce and pedant as the art of Watteau is troublesome.

The qualities of Outamaro have stood the test of various manners of approach, and the exercise of that peculiar gift of fascination that is his, has forced itself upon the attention even of those who had entered upon the study of Japan under the spell of its later magnificent realism. The art of Outamaro will win one also from reactionary mood, due to an over familiarity with the excellent, in a country like Italy, that has had its specious primitives and decadents. We would place Outamaro in a phase of art at once attractive and dangerous, in a phase where, as with Botticelli, an art has refined strangely upon itself, accepting, however, certain signs of fatigue, not, as with the Italian, in technique as from callousness or haste even, but in a tendency towards monotonous trains of thought. In Europe the art of Schöngauer with its over-sweetness, of Zasinger with its delicacy, would hardly prepare one for the might and passion of a Durer, whose art was influenced by them. So the art of Outamaro does not prepare one for the advent of a Hokusai. It is there that he will seem at once primitive and decadent, but, like Botticelli or Memling, Outamaro escapes at times into charmed spaces, and divines, intermittently perhaps, much that those who came before or after him did not divine, or were unable to achieve. A feeling that with this Japanese a monotonous and even feminine bent of mind mars an infinite refinement in form and colour may lead men of intelligence to suspect him, and with him the eighteenth-century art of Japan.

I take it that a certain impatience is manifest among serious art-lovers towards the trade-primitives of Italy, whose hold upon men of the last generation was excusable in the light of discovery and surprise. I do not think, however, that the bankruptcy in the delicate tradition of eighteenth-century

century art of Japan is entirely comparable to that notable break in the great Tuscan school after the death of Piero della Francesca, a Tuscan by temper. In Japan in the eighteenth century the technical side was developed; we may add that this technical refinement became subsequently a burden. The impeachment of Italy implies a technical collapse. The mind passes from Piero della Francesca to Leonardo for a continuity in restraint and technical perfection. The great violent art of Mantegna and Luca Signorelli seems contemporary with that of Paolo Uccello, and to contain efforts and experiments that Donatello had solved successfully. In Japan, one of the three centres whose tradition may be viewed in its entirety, the art-lover who is never angry or prone to reactionary moods, will accept this phase in which the love of women has absorbed all other attention, and will accept it for what it is.

The mere accidents of a tradition would make of Outamaro an early master of the modern school, "the school of life," and a pioneer in revolt against the conventions of older academies, in a revolution that may be said to culminate in the works of the great Hokusai. This definition, if commonly accepted, is to some extent inaccurate. I would urge that his unique prominence in an epoch of change has numbered him among the quite realistic masters. To aims of his own he added some interests common to the realistic schools, but did they not borrow from him in their earlier works? The spirit in which Outamaro painted has affinities with aristocratic and æsthetic conditions of the Tosa school, whose importance in Japanese art has been too constantly overlooked. I think he shows this mental bent more than his immediate forerunners or older contemporaries in the eighteenth century, with whom the realistic movement is latent, though their manner, like that of Outamaro, has no affinity with Chinese methods; and out of these grew the realistic school.

By the excursions of an exquisite fancy he extended or transformed the subject-matter of his forebears, who treated by preference scenes in the every-day life of ordinary people: scenes noticed by the aristocratic Tosas only in the background of a Court procession. As with the earlier eighteenth-century masters, he retained the Tosa convention of a chastened outline, a recollection of their aristocratic interiors, and the care for dress; something also of their over-wrought languor. The affinities of the Tosa school do not lean towards China. In method the Tosas were an offshoot of those miniaturists come from India with the Buddhist religion. We will find traces of Indian formulæ, in time transformed, it is true, but opposed to the more calligraphic influences of China, that were to be revived by Hokusai, and, at this moment, one is seized with a sense of hallucination; the half-revealed whiteness of an apparition passes across one's eyes beyond the perspective of sanctuaries, as we remember that touch of Hellenic sweetness at the heart of Indian Buddhism, carried with it into the farthest East among a new people and new conditions, not dead at all, but altered, and putting a trace of some remote European manner into this later phase of Japanese art in this eighteenth century.

Whatever may be the influences upon the work of Outamaro, his colour-harmonies fulfil his own needs and the exigences of the colour print; to the subject-matter of his immediate forerunners he has brought a gift of analysis, an element of the strange, the exquisite, that mere nothing making for grace. His name conjures up the vision of cloud-like colours, and shapes that have the curve of fountains, upon a world remote yet actual, as it would seem to us, for its newness and for its trivialities even, he has shed that grace as of faded things, the troubled hues of a fresco about to disappear, of a flower dying in the twilight.

With Outamaro the attention given to an act, a movement all bright, all gay, all trivial, has acquired by the subtleties of his art a tint of seriousness, of sadness, that never leaves him, that will class him among poetic painters, painters of fancy and of mood. Unlike Hokusai, we are told that dramatic effect lay beyond his aim. He was proud of his achievement as the mere painter of the spring, the painter, the portrait-painter of fair women. At home he was sometimes despised as the artist for the tea-houses, a minister to those frivolous needs of women to whom he brought the new things of fashion and the ways in dress, as a talent full of charm but devoid of all seriousness. Tragic episodes treated by some notion of his, as if acknowledging his limitation, have been given over to women instead of to men, where a haunting sense culminates in the dramatic opposition of an unique black dress to the folds of fairer dresses; or, perhaps, the anxiety faintly shadowed forth about the hour and place by the presence of a naked sword, the implied presence of an end beyond the motions of his actresses. A twist of mind breaks through the constant preoccupation to charm, sometimes the urging of inverted energies pushes him to the erotic and the terrible, but even here he will use majestic lines and chosen colours; we may well marvel at a train of thought so strange to the more downright ways of Europe. Yet we may be mistaken to wonder overmuch. An artist always grasps at hints, giving variety to the aspects of his work, in indifference to the probable effect upon those who would have praised his limitations without effort, or with hostility; such moods of delicate falsity remain not too distinct to the artist himself, for in the exercise of the imaginative faculties thoughts will take motion curiously, as it were from freshets of strange winds, blown from quarters remote; he will feel the countershock of distant events, and there is danger from without in the censure of such "digressions"; they will be found not to answer to the cravings of the affectation or imposture, but to the requirements in the health of an exceptional state. With Outamaro, whose mind was without anxiety or trouble, something of shadow may become noticeable, for half the passions of life and the terribleness of things make their appeal through the eyes to the mind. Let me repeat: his nature leant out towards the fairer aspects of life; it was untroubled by choice, by any emotion outside a world that lived very close to the flowers, in an immunity from anxiety and under conditions we can hardly imagine now and here; yet we have the evidence of other emotions forcing themselves upon him, and he has enriched his work with a passing allusion to them.

He died having loved too well. He was a great lover of women, whence curious intuitions, feminine intuitions—often present in men of his stamp—expressed here almost for the first time. Natures like his are not averse to the sight of maternity, and in his rendering of women ministering to the little wants of their children he retains a charm denied to the more grave Italian painters of the Madonna. His printed works are numerous. During his lifetime he enjoyed a great reputation that penetrated even to China, and leaf after leaf reveals his quest of the unexpected, directed by a preoccupation for delicate *nuances*—I can find no other word, and not for the sensational element therein. He will select from the fleeting graces of a game, or from the motions of reverie alike. This he clothes with the tints of early anemones and of faded leaves, with tender grey retaining an inward glow or flush, as of colours absorbed by time; his mere paper will be mottled with traces of colour that has been removed, or glazed with a frosted substance like the dried white of an egg. He possesses to the full the resources of a colourist who is always sensitive in the matter of surfaces—the colourist of a country that has several names for white. A common characteristic in his work is the love of mirrors, and of reflections in water used to repeat or introduce an element of interest. In composition he will affect the half-drowned appearance of things bathed in water, as in the two magnificent triptych prints, *Les Plongieuses* and *Les Porteuses de Sel*, veiling the limbs of his women in the twilight of a wave. It serves his purpose to reduce what might be too definite for him, by means of spangled and translucent materials become playthings in the hands of women, as in one of those magnificent prints where a courtesan passes a veil across her mouth and eyes, or in that design charming with its yellows and greens (now in the Louvre), in which a mother peeps at a child from behind a scarf. With him the green haze of mosquito-nets is used for the shadowing forth, beyond, of the half-hidden whiteness of a face, or to make emerge from the shadow a hand or arm with the effect of some flower rising from the water.

If as a colourist he works in a key that rests in a quietude of tones unusual in the art of Europe, we may add to this that time and use have made amont the stronger oppositions of blacks and yellows, or the vivid crossings of white used to freshen any languor of effect, and have given a quality that cannot be found in new surfaces, wearing the crispness of the size out of the paper, making his means more elusive and his colour more grave.

There is often a great attractiveness about things once bright, meant from the first to be captivating when thus greyed by the handling of time; for this reason men have been found who, like Baudelaire, divined the charm even in old-fashion plates, apart from any sententious interest to be drawn from them, as with our own Thackeray, who wore spectacles. The art of Tanagra passes as a fortunate addition to our enjoyment, brought about by things originally of slight importance, but found now to be exquisite indeed. For the moment the prints of Outamaro do not share this suffrage, in England they are known as yet to the few merely as

things of curiosity. That I have dwelt upon the slightness of their aims may seem against their being treated too seriously; but art in Japan dwells close to every movement in life, a ministrant jealous of all possible exactness, yet without fear of the indifference of persons like ourselves, jaded to all but novelty, whose appreciation is only one of sudden exclamations, and who ask art to be something added to life, like opium perhaps. The cultured of his country are light of heart, they dismiss the over-positive and the vague alike, but gracefully for what it is; a glint of light, a waif of perfume, the all-absorbing, the gluttonous melancholy at the heart of the East, touches them but little; they are apt to be ironical about it, to pass it by in a verse or a simile with a gaiety that is foreign to us also, at any rate recognising it nobly, as the passion for the few. One of their greatest artists, Outamaro, has accepted these conditions, ministering exquisitely to the needs of an audience that to him was never dull and rarely tired. A great sense of perfection alone reveals that finer sadness from which all sense of perfection is seldom entirely free.

Among slight things of grace few will be found to equal the grace, the charm that is his; his deftness of hand is no mere slightness of execution; and if in this matter it is a little languid beside the more direct brush-work of some Greek vase painters (at times strangely akin to Japanese workers with the brush), his sense of grace will be found to contain also a latent spark of strength almost wholly denied to the sweet popular figurettes of Tanagra; his conventions retain a franker, swifter sense of truth, for which reason he is sometimes classed as a realist; he also meant no more than to *please*, but to please a people whose possibilities for the future had not ceased, and, with all his self-consciousness of means, however complex, he represents the subtlety, the complexity of a tradition that is young, and for this reason his results will remain unforeseen and fresh to us.

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