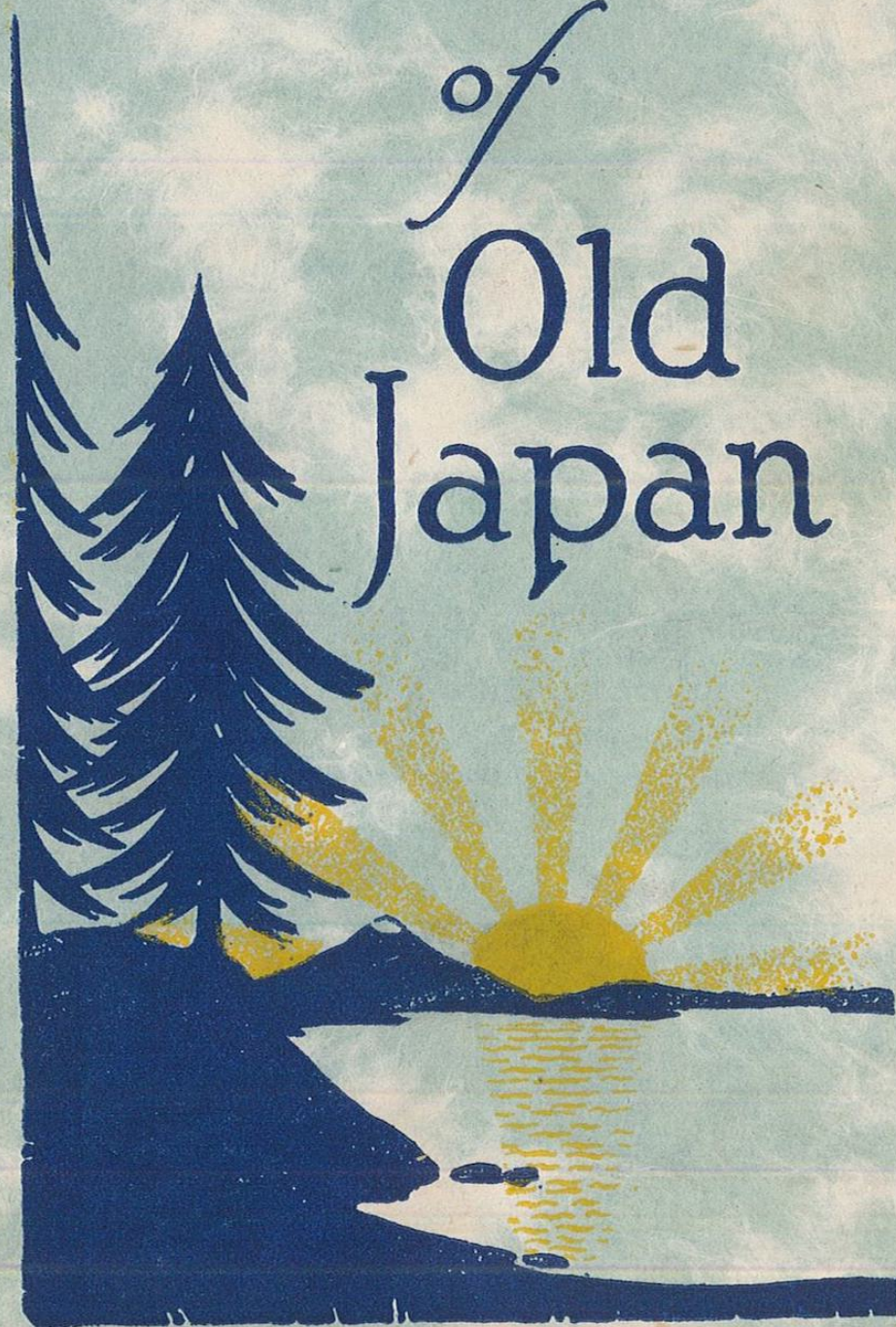


Eastward
Moves
the Art

of

Old
Japan



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COLOUR PRINTS

By ANNE DYER

ONE of the many "*whys*" asked by the reflective observer in this perplexing land of Japan, is:—*why* are the Japanese allowing their beautiful art of Colour Printing to lapse into complete extinction?

What would the shades of Hokusai and Hiroshige say, could they return to see the queerly anomalous position held by this art of theirs today,—at once despised and prized, treasured and rejected, eagerly sought for and entirely disregarded?

In their day, it was the unconscious flowering of the national artistic spirit. And being a frank departure from every classic canon and tradition of the recognized schools of art, it was held of no account by the scholastic, and its producers regarded merely as artisans of a pronounced vulgar type. Today, every square inch of Tokyo is scoured to secure not merely the

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"finds", but any old ragged and soiled sheet bearing the precious name of Harunobu, Kiyonaga, Utamaro, etc. And *why?* Not because the colour prints are one whit more valued in themselves; not because their producers have realized a real, if posthumous, distinction. But because in the eyes of foreigners they have achieved a commercial value which has lifted them into an important marketable commodity. Astonished indeed would any of those humble-minded craftsmen feel at seeing their productions fetch 1000—10,000 per cent above what they were considered worth when they were fresh from the block.

"But," they might well ask, "*why*, then are prints no longer produced? The process did not die with us. All the means, methods and materials still exist as in our time."

And this remains one of the inscrutable "Whys" we have vainly tried to answer.

One hundred years ago, block printing in Japan had reached the highest

point of development ever attained in any country. From examples of the art of this period, and earlier, other nations eagerly studied, learned, and applied. In consequence, the impress of this school of art is to be found today upon the productivity of France, Germany and America. But in Japan itself colour-printing, as a fine art, no longer exists. Even reprints from the old blocks have deteriorated so sadly, both in colour and accuracy of workmanship, that they are not worth the low price asked for them. There is, so far as we can see, no attempt to keep this art alive, or to resuscitate it from its dead ashes and give it new life. The few tentative efforts at block printing that are made today bear no resemblance, to Ukiyoye, but are rather feeble echoes of Shijo.

Yet, the "passing world" still flows on continuously; its busy life of streets, shops, theatres, is no less vivid than when Hokusai sketched therefrom his infinitely varied human comedy. The Flowery Quarter has lost none of its gorgeous colour and flow of movement

from the period when it yielded inspiration to Utamaro and Toyokuni, and other artists, who found therein an ever fresh field for their fertile pictorial sense and facile brush stroke. Nor has the landscape changed its quality in any essential respect. The charm of winding stream and crooked rice field, of curving coast and wind-bent pine, is no less potent than when Hiroshige produced his incomparable landscape studies. Now, as then, rise the steep snow-clad slopes of Kameyama; and under the sudden bursts of summer rain still bend the feathery tips of a bamboo grove. The magic of mist, snow, and rain still weaves its spell over this faery land. But where is the seeing eye, the recording hand?

In what direction must we look for the cause of the barrenness that seems to have fallen upon Japan of late years? Has her national genius perhaps found other avenues of outlet? We go to the picture galleries in the Uyeno and elsewhere, we look at textiles, porcelains, pottery,—and we seek in vain for the sense of design, for the

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harmony of proportion and rhythm of colour that delighted us in the production of even a generation ago.

What has happened to bring about so great a change in so short a time?

So far as we can see, it comes to this: Japan is, in fact, but following a law as old as Creation itself,—the law of cause and effect, the law of correspondence between the inward life and the outward manifestation,—a law as accurately exemplified in the life of a nation as in the life of an individual. In a word, the thought of Japan has changed. And the manifestation of this change inevitably externalizes itself under other and corresponding forms. What these forms are, or what is their comparative value, it is no part of this paper to discuss. They may be seen by anyone who visits this country, expressed in the public buildings, the street and railway systems, the motor cars, arsenals, factories,—in the concrete symbols of economic and material prosperity.

We ask ourselves,—Is Japan really blind to the extraordinary value of

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what she had, and what she has so easily given up? Is she deaf to the cry of the West for instruction in a simplicity and poetry of living that they have long ago lost or forfeited, or never had? Who shall say? The wheel of time brings many strange revolutions. It has brought this little Island country, self-contained, independent, and expressing beauty as naturally as a flower exhales perfume, into the forefront of the competitive struggle of modern civilization, with its vast web of industrial enterprise, its international trade and commerce, and its tremendous armaments, demands for colonization, etc., etc. Small wonder there are no Hiroshiges today! If the forces of nature are harnessed to utilitarian needs, we cannot be surprised if what was once expressed in terms of pictorial art, in a thousand varying forms to delight the eye and imagination, are now expressed in power houses, in electricity and steam.

But the demands of art are eternal. The artistic spirit will never be utterly quenched while the world lasts and

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while the expression of Beauty remains one of the laws of the human soul. But she is a shy, elusive spirit, and she will not linger where she is not made welcome. If the Lady on the Dollar dispossesses the Lady on the Print in the land of her birth, she will seek another home. This is just what she has done. And, queerly enough, it would appear to be the land of the Dollar that she has chosen as her adopted home. It is in America today that the best work in block printing is being produced. And it belongs to an American woman, Mrs Lum, of Minneapolis, to have the honour of producing work, such as it would be impossible to find produced in this country. She has had the wit and wisdom to seize the opportunity rejected in Japan, and to establish once more firmly the Lady of the Print on her throne.

A rather queer commentary it seems, that when the whole world is losing its head over the old colour prints of Japan, the silver medal for art at the Panama Exposition, should have been awarded to Mrs. Lum for her modern work in Colour Prints.

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By one of those happy chances,—which possibly are not chances at all, but belong rather to those obscure laws of self-development which we have not yet classified,—Mrs Lum some years ago came to Japan on her wedding trip. Full of artistic feeling and perception, and keenly responsive to the peculiarly national expression of the artistic spirit which belongs to Japan, her mind began to work on the problem of colour printing in a somewhat new relation to Japanese thought and life.

Mrs. Lum is possessed of a spirit too fresh and creative to be willing tamely to copy any school of art, however perfect. She realized, at first dimly, but with ever growing clearness, the fact that new moulds might be found into which to pour the plastic expression of the national art-idea.

One fresh and vital source into which might be successfully directed the beautiful art of Xylography, Mrs Lum has apparently found in the folk lore of this country. Instead of the Beauties of the Yoshiwara, or the life of the

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people of the streets, she has chosen to find her pictorial field in the fable and story of those beautiful old legends out of which, as out of some primitive soil, has grown the early beliefs and many of the quaint and attractive customs of these people. Only a mind truly imaginative and finely responsive could seize, as Mrs Lum has done, the idea back of the story, the peculiarly mystical quality of the great dreaming soul of the East, whose mental atmosphere is as different from that of the West, as is its physical atmosphere of mists and half tones and exquisite transfused lights from our own hard, clear, brilliant lights and sharply defined shadows.

While Mrs Lum has not by any means ignored the possibilities of the landscape print, as may be seen by her charming work in this direction, yet she has so far found her most fertile inspiration in the depiction of such poetic legends, as, for instance, that of the Tanabata; a story of the spirits of two lovers, condemned by heaven to live apart, but enabled to meet once a

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year by crossing the Milky Way, or the "River of Heaven" on a bridge of birds. Or the subtle and diabolical witcheries of the Fox-Woman, as she assumes mortal guise to set snares for the souls of men. Around this print, which exhibits strikingly Mrs Lum's marvellous colour sense, she has managed to throw a peculiar weirdness, in which the shadowy foxes, the leaping spurts of flame, and the great disc of the rising moon, all seem to blend equally in producing the incarnation of that spirit of Evil, the Fox-Woman, herself.

Again, and in wholly different vein, we see the cold frozen loveliness of the Snow Woman, whose embrace is death, breaking her frost fetters to take on a form more beautiful than life. And, still again, the Lady of the Sea, lonely as the spirit of the breaking wave, despite the treasures of the deep which strews its jewels about her feet.

All these, and many more, has Mrs. Lum interpreted, with a sure mastery of her materials, and a suggestive power that lends its own enchantment

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to these symbolic figures, placing them securely in that imaginative realm, which is the true home of art and poetry.

In her figure drawing, there will be seen a quality not essentially Japanese, or Indian, or Chinese, but partaking of the nature of all three,—a quality that might be called racial rather than national. Something in the flexuous sinuous suavity of the form and drapery of the Tanabata woman for instance, is strongly suggestive of early Indian art. Some others suggest the ancient Chinese. And the face and form of the Pied Piper might easily belong to some picturesque Moor, while those frankly impressionistic babies, drawn with the fewest possible brush strokes, belong to all ages and climes.

But what about the necessary training that has enabled Mrs. Lum to produce such pictures? Needless to say, it was not "picked up" on a few weeks' honey-moon trip. The process of colour-printing, with the preliminary work of making the design and cutting

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the blocks, requires long practice before any degree of skill may be attained. And only those who have lived in Japan, and suffered under like disadvantages, can appreciate what a struggle Mrs. Lum had to obtain even the simplest instruments of her craft, and the co-operation of workmen to execute her designs. But allied to an unflagging energy, Mrs. Lum possesses a patience equal to that of the imperturbable Japanese himself. Not discouraged by her failure to get any definite results at first, she came out on a second trip a year or so later; took a house in Tokyo, and settled down with the determination to "get at" what she wanted. Hours every day she sat on the floor, watching her workmen as they cut and prepared the blocks, and took off, or, to use the technical expression, "pulled" the impression. Every step of the process she learned herself, and today turns out far better printing than any of her workmen do.

On this last trip, the fourth—which she declares will be her last, though her friends smile skeptically, and say,

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"till next time",—she was accompanied by her two little girls, and they—true daughters of their mother—small mites though they are, have already learned to cut and print from simple blocks.

Are we destined to have a renaissance of Colour-printing in all its former perfection, in America. Already, for years past, simple block-printing, learned from the Japanese method, has been taught at Pratt's, and similar art institutes. And although the work is so primitive and elementary that it has no value as art, but is merely interesting as student's work, yet Japanese design has long been a factor in what has been called "applied art",—decorative design, art manufacture, etc.

We have taken from the Orient many valuable hints. All design and painting today show the tendency to eliminate inessential detail, to aim at a large and broad simplicity, to use more and more the power of suggestion rather than strict delineation. This lesson the East has taught us. Why do we not carry the lesson further, and carry over bodily a beautiful school of

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art, produced by simple mechanical process, which the Japanese have discarded, and which might so easily be transplanted to our shores? With a little material help and support, this movement, to which Mrs Lum has given an urgent creative impulse, might, with sufficient sympathy and co-operation on the part of a few co-workers, form the nucleus of a great national school of creative design, in which the art-idea of a new country should find its truest expression.