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LITTLE PIECES of JAPAN

Like the Proverbial Dog in the Manger
the Almond-Eyed Artists Hoard up Their
Precious Knowledge and Only the Wise
and the Cunning May Wrest It from Them

By BERTHA LUM

was willing to take me into his shop, but said it would be very expensive as I must work under the best printers. I decided that I would at least present my other letter before I paid ten dollars a day to work under a man who received not over seventy-five cents a day. This letter was to a prominent Japanese who had been a commissioner to the World's Fair at St. Louis, and who was well known in America and Europe as well

Art School, who made arrangements for me to work in the house of a friend who cut very fine blocks.

The next day the professor and I started early and went far into the suburbs of Tokyo, down back streets, and finally, at the end of an alley where the poorest people lived, in a very small house of four rooms, we found the man who was supposed to cut the best blocks in Tokyo. There I worked every day

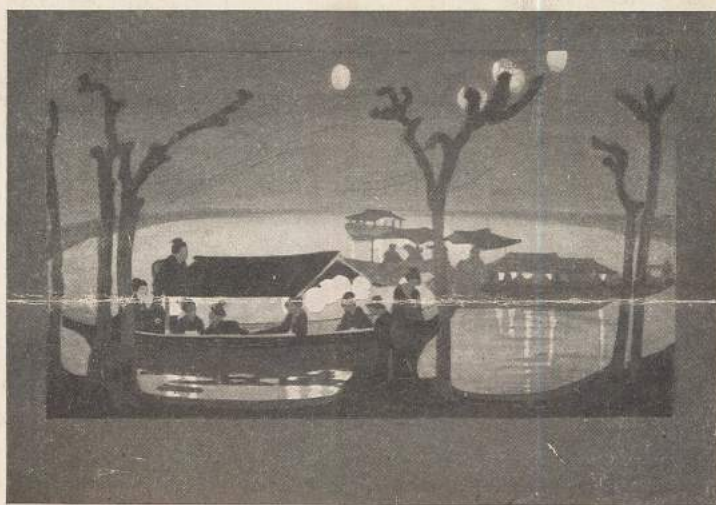


Down slippery, watery lanes of light cast from their yellow lanterns quaint Japanese figures, each topped by a yellow parasol, waver through the temple gate in the rain

BEFORE I went to Japan I thought that print makers were as plentiful there as paper lanterns or kimonos. I had set sail for the flowery kingdom, solely to see these old prints, to study the art of print making as the artists of Japan practise it, and to buy a set of tools. Yet after six weeks of diligent search I had found no such shop. It was only when, utterly discouraged, I had engaged passage for home, that I finally happened upon a shop where they reproduced old prints. It was an hour spent there that gave me all the knowledge I gained at that time of the process of making Japanese prints. This shop, as a great favor, allowed me to pay \$20 for thirteen tools—I was glad to get them at any price—though I found on a later trip that they were of an inferior grade, and bought fifty of the best for \$5.

BOOK LEARNING

When I returned home I added to the knowledge gained in this short time by reading everything obtainable on the subject of print making, and began to make prints myself. It was not easy; the task of working the process out by myself was so hopeless that three years later I returned to Japan with the intention of working in the shops there until I had learned the technical part of print making. I had two letters of reference this time; one was to the proprietor of the print shop that sold me the tools on my former visit, and when I sailed I found his name on the passenger list. He spoke no English, but through a mutual acquaintance I showed him the prints I had made and told him what I wanted to do. He



Boats "en fête" in the blue Japanese night, the river streaked with yellow light and, above, lanterns that float like yellow moons from the weird, bare branches of the trees

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as in his own country as a lecturer on art. He came to my hotel, was most courteous and interested, and though he was very busy, took time to bring to me one of the professors of the Imperial

for two months. My teachers were in reality two apprentices of twelve years of age, for "the master" came in but once or twice a day to approve, or mostly disapprove, of my progress.



If the skies are clear on the seventh night of the seventh moon, lovely Tanabata comes, clad in blue and lighted by a yellow candle, to meet her parted lover on the Milky Way

When I was ready to stop cutting blocks, accompanied by the professor and "the master," I was taken to another part of the city and presented with due ceremony to a printer. We drank tea and ate cake for a couple of hours, and all was arranged for me to begin work the next morning. I went daily for four weeks to the print shop and did no printing, but watched the man work out my ideas from the blocks I had cut. The shop was in a part of the city unfrequented by foreigners, and when I appeared at the end of the street on which it was located, it would immediately fill with men, women and children; but when I reached the house my rickshaw boy would go so near that I could slip into the door without annoyance.

A MARK FOR THE CURIOUS

We worked in a room on the first floor with only the paper *shoji* between us and the mob. All who could come near enough would wet a finger, punch it through the paper and then use the opening as a peep hole, and we could look up at any time and see a dozen or more eyes watching. The entire screen would have to be recovered each day after my departure. None of these people spoke or understood a word of English, and my Japanese was only useful in bargaining for "junk." I had no interpreter when cutting blocks, but I needed one for work with the printer, and the best one I could obtain was my rickshaw boy, who found it so much more interesting to sit on the floor and say such things as "too much blue." (Continued on page 116)



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In Japan wee little maidens clad in a riot of colors like to the birds and the flowers fling up their paper kites and laugh when the wind fills them up till they look like fishes

LITTLE PIECES *of* JAPAN

(Continued from page 65)

"more water," and the like than to pull people about in a jinrikisha.

I returned to America and for three years worked out the details of printing that interested me, trying to add my own ideas to those gained in Japan, and last year I decided to go back to Japan, take a house in Tokyo for the winter, send for my old printer, and—enjoy myself. I thought this would be so easy that I could make all the arrangements alone. Accordingly I took the house, settled my family, and started out to find my men, but—they had vanished completely. Even the professor had disappeared, and the man who had discovered him for me before was lecturing in America. With my house boy I searched every day for a month, following every clue, even the slightest, but all to no purpose. The way of the tourist in Japan is very smooth; ivories, embroideries, curios, bronzes, await her in the shops, or are brought to her hotel—she can not escape them; but if one wants something of the people—to learn an art, to find a native, or to buy something purely Japanese—one faces a wall in which there are no openings. Then one afternoon, when a Japanese friend was calling, more for something to talk about than with any idea of his helping me, I told him the whole story. He said quite simply that he would find the men I wanted to see.

He was one of Japan's Ambassadors

home on leave of absence, and inside of three days after he interested himself in the affair arrangements were made for me to meet Japanese artists and Japanese people interested in art. I received invitations to everything attractive from an artistic viewpoint, and I met lecturers, commissioners, writers, and artists until I was quite overwhelmed. My lost printer was found immediately, and inside of a week my old block man and the printer, too, were sitting on my floor drinking tea, while the Ambassador acted as interpreter. When I asked for the two small boys who had formerly helped me cut blocks, I was told that both were dead—one of consumption and the other of insanity. It is only in such chance ways as this that one is reminded of the wretchedness back of Japan's smiling exterior.

Block-printing is really a lost art in Japan. There are very few men who carry on the work, and they are mostly poor and live in out-of-the-way places. In Tokyo, a city of two million people, they are as completely lost as though they had never existed. I returned home only a year ago, yet the Ambassador who found my men for me is now in a foreign country, the entire district where the printer lived has been burned, and were I to return to Tokyo to-morrow I doubt if I could find any one to help me print save through sheer luck.