

THE PHILOSOPHICAL RESEARCH SOCIETY

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CONTRIBUTORS' BULLETIN

April, 1984

EASTERN ART COMES TO THE WEST

Dear Friends:



While it is true that collections of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean works of art were being assembled in Europe in the middle years of the nineteenth century, the interest in such material among American collectors was limited to a few wealthy persons. Art dealers emphasized the importance of modernism and burdened the market with many meaningless productions with little or no cultural significance. The trend has spread to monumental sculpturing and compositions of various types appeared in parks, public buildings, galleries, and museums.

Master works of Oriental genius were neglected for a number of reasons. Most important examples were involved in religious or philosophical symbolism, and such message and meaning was actually offensive to those lacking a sincere appreciation for beauty. Gradually the market broadened to include floral designs, landscapes, and Japanese woodblock prints. Even fifteen or twenty years ago, Japanese and Chinese dealers admitted that there were few Western buyers for sacred subject matter. Some museums secured a few items of the highest obtainable quality to more or less balance their collections. Another hinderance was complete unfamiliarity with the names of the great masters of Eastern painting and sculpturing. Very few religious pictures were signed as this was contrary to the spirit of humility which dominated the Eastern schools. Asia had its own Michelangelos, Leonardo daVincis, and Albrecht Durers, but Western collectors had never heard of these Asiatic artists.

It is impossible to understand why a Japanese nobleman would exchange ten of his provinces for one tired-looking tea bowl. It was even more difficult to comprehend why this militant feudal lord would sit by the hour in rapt admiration for this tea bowl. The first piece of Satsuma ware I saw in America was offered as a prize for the winner of a pinball game in a beach amusement park. I must modestly admit that I won the prize and it would bring a fair price at public auction today. Now this has all changed. Most important museums and art galleries have special curators to expand and

protect their Asiatic collections. The great auctioneering houses of Sotheby's, Christie's and others have important sales in New York, London, Hong Kong, and other selected centers where connoisseurs assemble. Prices are fantastic and often completely unrealistic, but there seems to be no serious weakness developing in the market.

The point of all this shows that persons in every walk of life are beginning to recognize the contributions that works of art can make to the cultural needs of the human being. Many collectors of moderate means now feel that they can set aside ten, fifteen, or twenty dollars a month to nourish their aesthetic instincts. There is hardly a major publication these days that does not invite lovers of beauty to invest in ceramic dinner bells, unusually designed thimbles, hand-painted porcelain plates, postage stamps printed in gold, and reasonable facsimiles of Greek, Egyptian, and Hindu antiquities. These are now heavily collected and the family proudly displays a velvet-lined case provided at no extra charge to those subscribing for a collection of souvenir spoons.

It is only fair to say that many of these offerings have honest aesthetic appeal. They are created by skillful workmen and may have a fair future as most of the collections are limited in number. The new trend is probably motivated, at least in part, by the rapid increase in the price of ultramodern works. A number of prominent modern universities and colleges are now offering courses in Oriental religions, and barriers due to prejudice are rapidly breaking down. Those studying Eastern beliefs are now beginning to appreciate the artistic contributions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and the schools of East Indian idealism and mysticism.

The proof of the trend is obvious. So many Western people have been intrigued by the paintings and sculpturings of Korea, Tibet, and Nepal that these countries have found it necessary to prohibit further exportation of their treasures. Fortunately however, modern artists of skill and insight are perpetuating the ancient skills and producing works of genuine artistic value.

Although the entire field has been exploited, one important fact remains, Western persons on many social and cultural levels are recognizing the importance of idealistic art. They are weary of products of dreary materialism. It is no longer helpful to use fine art as an instrument of social protest. In the art world itself, there is a strong trend toward Asiatic subject matter and techniques. The highest meaning of art is truly that it can reveal to us, at least in part, the "substance of things unseen." The gentle symbolism of the beautiful reminds us of the majesty and mystery of the commonplace. To reveal eternal values, to find some shadowy medium which can release hope, faith, and charity are far more important than we realize. A picture is a window in a wall. We do not wish to look out every day to gaze upon factories, smokestacks, nuclear reactors, or the ravages of hatreds and exploitation. After all, we are here only a short time, and it is better if art reminds us that we have a better destiny than we have ever known.

There is another fascinating detail which was pointed out to me years ago by a Japanese art dealer. He explained that it was contrary to Eastern thought to put pictures in boxes. By this he meant that frames interfered with the life revealed in the picture. It was better to mount the painting on a background of softly colored silk and hang it as a wall scroll. It was also good to have several different scrolls suitable to the moods and occasions in the life of the owner. He could hang a proper painting for a wedding, a christening, a birthday, or a religious festival. Bright scrolls with birds and butterflies could preserve good spirits in dark or gloomy weather or when the smog was bad. In Japan there are sets of twelve scrolls, each featuring a flower design for one of the months of the year.

Another meaningful point was the importance of avoiding the distractions caused by cluttering. A beautiful work of art should never be surrounded with bric-a-brac, and preferably should have a wall to itself. Even if the fortunate person has several choice items that bear witness to his refinement, they should never be displayed all at once. One, or at most two, is enough for any one occasion. Two paintings are not a good arrangement. There should be one picture and then a plate or bowl or standing figure. In the Orient, obviously religious subjects are not displayed to visitors who are unsympathetic. In the Orient, a painting of the Buddha or one of the bodhisattvas is hung when a priest, abbot or a nun is expected. It can also be properly shown if there is illness in the house so that it can bestow a benediction upon the sick.

It is pleasant to note that many western people are beginning to experience the peaceful inspiration of Asiatic art. There is no reason why Western man cannot interpret his own inner hopes and aspirations. He can bring his architecture into closer harmony with his integrities. He can bring comfort and consolation to his cluttered thoughts and conflicting emotions. Good art releases the natural beauties resident in the human soul. If our outer lives are discordant and devoid of inspiration, we can at least experience the spiritual refreshment in our homes no matter how humble they may be. Maybe we should think of art, not merely as a source of personal encouragement, but as a proof of the ever-present availability of the Divine promise.

Most sincerely yours,



MANLY P. HALL

RECOMMENDED READING:

Carr, Rachel	Arthritis	(P) \$6.95
Cayce, Hugh Lynn	Incredible Story of Edgar Cayce	(P) \$2.95
Cunningham, Donna	Being a Lunar Type in a Solar World	(P) \$9.95
Epstein, Alan	Psychodynamics of Inconjunctions	(P) \$8.95
Fromm, Erich	Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis	(P) \$4.95
Godwin, Joscelyn	Mystery Religions in the Ancient World	(P) \$9.95
Green, Jane Nugent	You & Your Private I	(P) \$8.95
Johnston, William	Christian Zen	(P) \$5.95
Jonas, Hans	Gnostic Religion	(P) \$7.95
Kimball, Gayle	50/50 Marriage	(P) \$9.95
Krochmal, Arnold & Connie	Field Guide to Medicinal Plants	(P) \$7.95
McDermott, Robert A. (Ed.)	Essential Steiner	(P) \$10.95
Olyanova, Nadya	Psychology of Handwriting	(P) \$5.00
Shepard, Odell	Lore of the Unicorn	(P) \$4.95
Shibayama, Zenkei	Zen Comments on the Mumonkan	(P) \$10.95
Stutley, Margaret & James	Harper's Dictionary of Hinduism	(P) \$16.95

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