

CHINESE PAINTINGS

MRS. AYSOUGH'S LECTURE

REVIEW OF ANCIENT WORK

The following is a pretty full report of the lecture delivered by Mrs. Aysough at the Casino, Algonquin Hotel, in aid of the Red Cross, on Friday evening, July 26.

THE origin of Chinese painting is veiled in obscurity; the art must of course have been long preceded by that of drawing, and indeed the Chinese attribute the introduction of this latter to the legendary Emperor Fu Hsi who reigned 2,853 B. C. and who was possessed of the body of a dragon and the head of an ox. In his day, however, and for centuries later all inscriptions were either chiselled on stone or made by means of a stylus, on tablets of bamboo. "The earliest mention of colour dates from the reign of the Emperor Shun B. C. 2255, His Majesty—if we accept the Shu Ching or Book of History and there is no reason why we should not—wished that the twelve symbols of power, which had been handed down from the earliest ages should be embroidered (some say painted) in the five colours on his sacrificial robes, and with certain restrictions on the robes of his Ministers of State." The symbols often met with in ceramic art and elsewhere are then, enumerated. He continues: "According to some, the first painter was a young sister of the Emperor Shun, named Lei, who was in consequence known as Picture Lei." Alas, cried a disgusted critic of later ages, "that this divine art should have been invented by a woman."

It was not until about B. C. 211 that Shih Huang Ti, or the First Emperor, although he was the intrepid founder of United China, who has earned the execration of Chinese literature, as he it was who ordered the "burning of the books," dispatched his trusted general Meng Tien to the Northern Marches that he might there superintend the building of that most marvellous of the works of man, the Great Wall; and Meng Tien it was who, according to tradition, invented the writing brush. Whether or not this invention was perfected while the doughty general was engaged upon his task in the desert-wilds we do not know; but one can easily imagine that a scholar, exiled from his environment, would find delight in attempting various experiments that would assist in the perfection of the instrument by which his thoughts might be perpetuated. This is perhaps not an inept moment to emphasize the intimate connexion between Chinese calligraphy and Chinese painting. This point is well argued in an interesting article by Dr. Ferguson in the Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society Vol. XLV, for 1914. He writes of a book called "Ink Remains."

The title of this book impresses a foreign reader as peculiar, but it has the most familiar sound in his language to a native of China. Chinese speak of ink in phrases where we say pen. The "power of the pen" would be written by Chinese as "the power of ink." Literary product is the product of ink—not of pen. The title of An's book refers to the writings and paintings which came under his observation. These were the product of ink, the ink of literary men.

"The copy of the book owned by me is in four volumes, two of which are devoted to records of writing 'shu,' and two to paintings 'hua.' The association of writing and painting is taken for granted in the classification of 'shu' and 'hua' as common products of ink. In this association which is met with in all books on painting in the Chinese language, we see at once that painting is linked with writing, i. e. calligraphy, and not, as in Europe, with sculpture or architecture. This distinction is fundamental in the study of the pictorial art of China. Only confusion and disappointment can come to one who approaches this study from the same viewpoint as he uses for the understanding of the productions of European artists. In China, he must always remember that painting is the work of cultivated men of literary instincts and not of men trained in schools of painting. A few good students never become expert calligraphists. . . . The poet and painter are men who, in addition to being students and calligraphists, have imagination and inspiration. They are not of a separate class from other literary men, but have talents above their fellows. The ink used for writing poems is the same as that for sketching the mist on the hill-tops, and is not different from that used in ordinary writing. Ink remains, therefore, are literary remains; only it must be kept in mind that the word 'literary' must be widened in its meaning so as to include calligraphy and painting."

The latter was indubitably an offshoot of the former. The beautiful characters, originally pictures, are formed with the same swift, sure strokes of the brush as valued in pictorial art. We see that Chinese painting in its present form had its rise about 200 years before Christ, and more than a century before Caesar invaded Britain. In his "History of Chinese Pictorial Art, an invaluable handbook, Prof. Giles devotes his first chapter to the period preceding this date. And now before we proceed to study the history of Chinese painting let us first consider the

attitude of mind which we must adopt towards it.

The distinctive attitude which the Oriental assumes towards Nature must be taken into consideration. Here indeed lies the very crux of the matter; whereas to the individualistic West, Man is the Centre and Lord of the Universe, he is on the contrary, to the more integral East, but one of the component parts of Creation. The philosophy which since the days of the I Ching (written by Duke Wen of Chou, before 1122 B. C.) has directed the evolution of the Chinese mind, considers "every being in the world, every manifestation of Nature, every genii, every god, as an active part of the great whole, of that Reality which is behind and beyond the flux of phenomena." This philosophy it is which has given to the Oriental his marvellous comprehension of Nature in all her moods and works, be these of the most trivial. With a flower, a bird, a tree, he feels a sense of kinship which must of necessity be denied to his more sophisticated brother of the West, and the Chinese artist strives to interpret the very soul of Nature, as our portrait painter strives to unveil the most intimate characteristics of those whose features he is delineating.

We cannot too strongly emphasize this point, the difference between the ideals of the East and those of the West. To comprehend Oriental Art we must detach ourselves from our traditional culture; we must sympathetically envisage a psychology, a philosophy differing widely from our own. In China as the individual is absorbed in the family, so the family is absorbed in the clan, this clan again as but a unit of the State, which in itself has ever been regarded as one great family, merging into the bosom of Nature herself, Heaven the Universal Father, Earth the Universal Mother, such is the conception of Creation held in the Far East. The men of China have ever chosen natural objects, mountains, rivers and so forth, as intermediaries between themselves and the Deities of Heaven and Earth, while no image has ever been made of the Great Spirit Shang Ti, who corresponds to our idea of God, nor have they ever regarded Him in anthropomorphic form.

An agricultural people, dwelling in a land in which every human need can be supplied; a land isolated by great natural barriers from intercourse with the rest of the world; it is not strange that they live on terms of an intimacy with Nature unknown to those who inhabit less genial climes. These verses express to me very vividly the deep sentiment of the Chinese people:

Four hundred million men asleep,
Dreaming agrarian dreams
Of seeds and sowing in the fields,
And irrigating streams,
Of harvest times and plenteous yields
And hopeful aftermaths,
Of peace (said I) after the reap
And treading simple paths.

The sun is glinting on the Wall,
His precocious joy is in the Land,
His fiery vigour is on the faces
Of people numerous as sand;
The moon is showing silver graces
On Buddha's temples; and the graves
Of mankind immemorial
Wash the still meadows like calm waves.
The love of peace is here on earth,
Peace as in an agrarian dream;
The dreamer is the child of age
Led through Time's caverns, by the gleam
Of unimagined heritage;
Antiquity, like living breath,
Ushers his spirit in at birth,
And blows it Godward at his death.

Though this discussion may seem apart from our subject, it is really in most intimate connexion. The art of Eastern Asia is the reflection of their unique evolution, and those who would really comprehend its essence must study the philosophy upon which it is founded; we may, however, now no longer stay our steps, except to consider for a moment the question of technique.

The Six Canons, the Six Necessities, and the Three Faults now before you contribute their united evidence to set forth that the chief quality required of the Chinese artist is a vigorous, rhythmic vitality; a long study of his subject, a comprehension of its very soul, enables the painter to set it forth upon his silk, or his paper as the case may be, with rapid, decisive strokes in which it must be remembered there can be no alteration, no correction; no painting out, as with us, is possible; either silk or the soft paper used absorb instantly the colour lined thereon. It is this quality of the medium, perchance, which renders a great Chinese painting so instinct with spontaneity, and a poor copy so "cabineted, cribbed, confined," if one may apply such a metaphor. And now a word as to the status of a "copy" in Chinese art. A well known artist would invariably collect about him a group of students and admirers who would paint in the style of their master, frequently indeed reproducing his works; unless however these were instinct with life they were considered worthless. Certain well known artists, such as Ch'iu Ying of Ming, whose work is much appreciated, and a professed copyist, Prof. Giles thus describes his work: "Ch'iu Ying studied under Chou Ch'en, the latter an artist about whose real position critics disagree. The former soon discovered

that he would never reach high rank, contented himself with the simple rôle of copyist, producing many pictures which were not to be distinguished from the originals, even by experts. It has already become fairly clear that the position of a copyist in Chinese art is not altogether that which is assigned to the copyist in Western countries; especially as in China considerable latitude seems to be allowed, and any copyist would meet with high praise who might manage to improve on the original."

A word as to perspective. To appreciate Chinese painting at its true worth the Occidental must adopt a point of view differing in many ways from that in which he has been educated. He must realize that the outlook of the artist is that of a bird on the wing, and that the perspective in the apparently fantastic landscapes he is studying seems so strange, because in the majority of cases, the painter has regarded his subject from above, he has walked among the mountains, or has remained seated by the window of his rustic dwelling, gazing down upon the scene before him, until it has impressed itself upon his very soul, then, and then only, has he in the privacy of his chamber transferred it to his silk. "I have it all in my heart" was the reply of the great Wu Tao-tzu to his Emperor who had dispatched him to depict the beautiful scenery on the Chia-liang river, Seu-ch'uan, and who was amazed when the painter returned empty-handed.

Now to return to the history of Chinese Art. In the Chinese catalogues many paintings are described which date from the first years of our era, but the earliest example extant is, as far as we know, the scroll now housed in the British Museum; the scenes illustrate a short composition consisting of precepts addressed to the ladies of the Imperial Harem, entitled "Admonitions of the Instructress in the Palace." The artist, Ku K'ai-chih, lived nearly a century before the Saxons under Hengist and Horsa settled in Britain.

In the middle of the scroll is a landscape, and this apparently is the only crude portion of the work, the mountains are out of proportion and stiffly drawn; thus we see that, as with Western art, figure-painting first arrived at maturity. It is difficult to decide as to the most concise method of treating our subject. Were sixty hours instead of sixty minutes available, one could trace the evolution of Chinese Art through the historic periods of T'ang, Sung and so forth; one could discuss its connexion with the art of Central Asia, a most fascinating branch of the subject; one could note the immense, but often exaggerated influence of Buddhism; one could attempt to explain the causes which have led to its sad decline. It seems best, however, to-day, to mention a few of these great painters who have created this wonderful art, and study a few of the various subjects from which they have drawn their inspiration. To turn again to Bin-yon:

"First we must mention those great symbolic figures which had early taken shape and meaning in the Chinese imagination—the Dragon and the Tiger. Both are symbols of power. In the superstition of literal minds the Dragon was the genius of the element of water, producing clouds and mists; the Tiger the genius of the mountains whose roaring is heard in the wind that shakes the forest. But in the imagination of poets and of artists these symbols became charged with spiritual meanings, meanings which we should regard as fluid rather than fixed, and of import varying with the dominant conception of particular epochs. In the Dragon is made visible the power of the infinite, the power of change; in the Tiger, the power of material forces. When the tiger was portrayed simply as the royal beast, it was painted in the colours of nature. But when conceived as a symbolic power, it was always painted in ink only, like the Dragon. The two subjects have been painted as a pair of pictures by almost every artist of note who worked in the Chinese tradition, whether in China or in Japan."

Popular Taoism treats of the fantastic, the magical, the supernatural; of demons, fairies, and hien jen, those mortals who by long communion with Nature have attained to supernatural powers. The picture on the screen is by Yen Hui, an artist especially popular among the Japanese, and is thus described by Bin-yon:—"One of the well-known genii or wizard hermits of Taoist legend, of whom it is told that his spirit, having gone on a journey to the Sacred Mount of the Immortals, left the inanimate body under the charge of a disciple till his return; but the disciple being called away to a dying mother, the returning spirit was unable to find its body, and seeing a ragged beggar on the point of expiring, seized the corporeal lodging thus vacated. Li T'ieh Kuai is therefore usually represented as here, in the guise of a beggar with girdle of leaves and a crutch, breathing out his spiritual essence."

Buddhism contributed an utterly different spirit—one of intense meditation and concentrated calm. The great founder of the faith is thus depicted by an anonymous artist of Sung. Above the painting is an inscription which is the one used when a message from Shakyamuni himself is to be delivered. This is from the To Hsin Ching, a book which contains the creed of half

Asia. Many people of the Confucian and Taoist schools as well as those of the Buddhist, recite it daily, as do Christians sing hymns. It states the solid fundamental principles of religion which commend themselves, not merely to the majority of men, but also to the majority of men. It closes as follows:—

"This is the real truth without any falsehood. It can deliver you from all troubles, therefore in repeating 'this magic incantation' sum up and say 'Praise, Praise, Praise God, Praise His eternal wisdom. Praise the students of this Law, the Illumined.'"

In the painting before us Shakyamuni is seen standing, against a background of exquisitely coloured clouds, pouring his divine grace upon the world from a gourd abouted bottle, one foot is placed upon a pink lotus and one upon a white.

Famous paintings were often chiselled on stone and this figure of Kuan Yin the goddess of Mercy is the photograph of an ink rubbing on paper, taken from one of these chisellings. The original painting was by Wu Tao-tzu, admittedly the greatest of Chinese painters. No authentic works of his remain. A contemporary of the famous poet, Li Tai-po, lived early in the eighth century, Bin-yon thus describes his work and personality:—

"He showed as a youth extraordinary powers, and the Emperor gave him a post at court. His fertility of imagination and his fiery swiftness of execution alike astounded his contemporaries. He is said to have painted over three hundred frescoes on the walls of temples alone. He was prodigal of various detail, but what chiefly impressed spectators was the overpowering reality of his creations."

Among the favorite subjects of the Chinese are studies of birds, flowers, and animals which often have a symbolic addition to their apparent meaning. A modern painting most charmingly executed of a great and two kids expresses by a subtle play on words the awakening of Nature in the spring.

The wild geese, in this instance painted by Lin Liang, perhaps the greatest of Ming artists, are as a rule presented in combination with the dying rushes of an autumn marsh.

"The wild geese is said to be peculiarly the bird of the Yang or principle of Light and Masculinity in Nature. It follows the sun in his wintry course toward the south, and shows an instinctive knowledge of the times and seasons in its migrations. It always flies in pairs, and is hence employed as an emblem of

the married state. In the ritual of the Chow dynasty it was accordingly enumerated among betrothal presents."

The charming study of peonies is the work of the late Empress Dowager, who was noted for her calligraphy and taste; while that of birds and rabbits under a blossoming plum—snow-clad, is by Shen Nan-pin, an artist who although he seems to lack freedom and spontaneity, is extremely popular with the Japanese. Of greater charm perhaps is the ink study by Lo Kuang, its meaning is thus set forth:—

"As the Owl alone among birds is wakeful during the silent night; as the prunus alone among flowers, blooms during the coldest period of the year; so the scholar alone, among mortals, devotes himself to the study of that Way which is the Way of Life, by which mankind may be purged of its lesser desires, and live according to its higher impulses."

As a finale to this chapter of our study let us glance for a moment at an eagle painted by an unknown artist during the T'ang a thousand years ago; because the sound Ying, eagle, is a homonym of Ying, heroic, therefore the bird is ever an emblem of heroism.

Before we discuss the most important branch of Chinese art, landscape, let us glance for a moment at the figure paintings.

Ancestral Portraits. These which are so popular with Occidentals who liken them to "Holbeins" and to the work of various old masters, are never for religious reasons met with in the collection of a Chinese amateur. In Strehlmeier's catalogue these are thus described:—

Ancestral portraits, To Shou, as the Chinese call them, are occasionally painted during the lifetime of the subject; as a rule, however, the painter is not called in until after death, when he takes a careful sketch of the face, completing the figure at his leisure. During the funeral ceremonies the portrait is hung directly above the coffin, when it is supposed to be inhabited by the spirit of the dead. In the procession to the grave it is carefully stored, either in the private Ancestral Hall or in one of those called Tzu Tang which are built for common use of many families. Its only appearance in the home is during the first six days of the year, when all ancestral portraits in the possession are hung; and when obeisance is paid to them.

As Wu Tao-tzu stands to the age of T'ang so stands Li Lung-mien, the great religious painter, to the age of Sung. His versatility, however, was great and the painting before us is characteristic of his genius.

An interesting feature of his work is supreme respect for the great and domes-

tic virtues in woman. It was one of his favorite subjects to paint in all the splendours of their rich beauty and moral nature the great ladies that he had known at court, and the noble wives and mothers of Chinese biography. This is reckoned by his contemporaries as one of his finest traits. Fortunately one of the most beautiful specimens in thin ink on paper has come down to us. It is a lady, evidently of youth and delicate nature, whose luxuriant hair is caught back into three heavy coils by a single rough wooden hairpin. Her garment is a single robe wrapped around her slender body. This must either represent some famous noble lady living in lofty calm though reduced to penury, or more probably a widow who, has dedicated her gentle life to her husband's memory.

Of the same period is the portrait of the illustrious statesman Fan Chung-yen, which reveals the human spirit far more than is usual in Chinese paintings. An interesting group by the Sung painter Mi Fei is that of the famous Wang Hsi-chib.

An official of distinction who lived in the fourth century A.D., he was far-famed as a master of various styles of calligraphy. His passion for geese caused people from far and near to bring him offerings of these birds in exchange for which they begged a few examples of his penmanship. Upon one occasion he was attracted by the peculiar call of a goose, the sole possession of an old woman, and expressed his intention of paying her a visit. The old lady joyously killed the goose in his honor fancying that his delight was that of an epicure, whereas Wang Hsi-chin had hoped to admire the living bird.

Under the Mongols one painter is ranked above all others, this is Chao Meng-fu, especially famed for his horses. The scene before us depicts revellers of the T'ang period returning from a feast in, it must be admitted, a condition of intoxication; the treatment is most powerful and the movement very free.

This little lady, painted by Chai Shih-chou, a Ming artist, is one of the figures from a scroll depicting the hundred beauties; she wears the graceful dress of the T'ang period and is still remembered by the note, paper in daily use; she lived in the ninth century A.D. The ornamental note-paper named after her was said to have been dipped by her in a stream from which water has been taken some years before by a concubine of Ts'ui Ning to wash the exceptionally filthy stole of a Buddhist priest. This was of course a highly virtuous action and the stream had at once become miraculously filled with flowers.

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