

CONTENTS.

Leading Article:	PAGE
A Japanese Critic on Botticelli	745
The Romance of Soldiering and Sport	746
Irresistible Masochism	746
The Roots and Causes of the Wars (1914-1918)	747
The Press of the Soldier	747
Science, Religion and Reality	748
The Overbury Mystery	748
Mr. Poulton Higelow's Memoirs	749
"Hard Lying"	749
Argonauts of the South	749
Mine, de La Fayette	750
A Scholar's Memories	750
The Life of Selwyn	750
Essays in Medieval History	751
The Lyric Theatre, Hammerstein	751
A Little Diary	751
The Child Charlotte	752
A Study of Petrarch	752
Lynce Letters, 1690-1760	753
The Rhyls of Theophrastus	753
The Little World	753
Jonson and Drummond	754
The Roman Aqueducts	755
Cricketer Personalities	755
Ships and Misadventures	755
New Novels:	
Winter	754
Krakati	754
Simonetta Perkins	754
The Love Rack	754
Coombe St. Mary's	754
Correspondence:	
A Canon for English Verse	756
The First Folio of Shakespeare	756
Mount Sinai	756
Indian Mutiny	756
The "Spurred A"	756
Chaucer in French	756
H. D. Blacklock	756
Mr. John Lane	756
New Foreign Books	756
Annotated List of New Books and Reprints	757, 758, 759
Notes on Sales	760
"The Times" Chess Column	760

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A JAPANESE CRITIC ON BOTTICELLI.

Oriental art has become so vital a part of our aesthetic experience that we are apt to forget how short a time it is since it was revealed to Europe. A generation ago, though the West had so long been familiar with the decorative design of Asiatic countries, the general attitude was still little removed from that of the eighteenth century, when *chinoiserie* became a fashion. How amusingly bizarre were these exotic creations: toys of the mind; a delight for the collector of curious things. Students here and there knew more; but even to special students only glimpses had been vouchsafed of the real glories of the art of Asia. The frescoes of Ajanta had indeed been copied and published, but in the nineteenth century the world was hardly ripe for their appreciation. Now, when copies from the wall-paintings at Bigh, near Ajantha, to those at Ajanta, are exhibited, as they have been during the last few weeks in the British Museum, artists and critics alike are moved to spontaneous enthusiasm. And the cry is not, "How strange is this beauty! But how strangely near to the art we know!" So it is with the rare great relics of old Chinese painting and sculpture. It is their affinity not their remoteness which impresses.

Books on various phases of Oriental art have poured from the presses of Europe in recent years. The newly opened field, with its rich possibilities of discovery, has diverted many from the study of European art, where the ground has been so well trodden that little secrets left to discover and quite insignificant artists have to be dragged from their modest obscurity to satisfy the zeal of researchers bent on making a conquest. Meanwhile, European art has not lain hidden from the East. Have we ever thought to inquire what impression it has made? From this time on our aesthetic consciousness has to take into account the art not of Europe only but the world; but it must be the same also for Orientals. Hitherto we have had little opportunity for knowing what kind of emotion a cultured Oriental mind experiences before the masterpieces of Western art. The book before us is therefore an event of some importance. For the first time we have a full and complete study of an Italian master from the pen of a Japanese critic. The announcement of its publication has naturally roused an eager curiosity.

Whatever expectations may have been formed of it, we think that they will altogether be surpassed by a study of the actual work. Another book on Botticelli! Had the author been a European, we should have been tempted to cry out against its superfluity. Did not Herbert Home in 1908 publish an incomparable monument of scholarly research, dissolving accumulated legends and establishing each detail of the master's career? Did not Dr. Bode, in a book of which the English translation appeared but a few weeks ago, set out to fill in the picture with an account of Botticelli's relation to his times and incidentally to enlarge the canon of his works by acceptance of many paintings rejected by Home? Of rhapsodies and literary appreciations we have had a surfeit. And yet, wonderful to say, Mr. Yasui's book entirely justifies itself, quite apart from its singular interest as being the work of a Japanese. It is a magnificent publication. One volume contains the text, the other two contain nothing but illustrations. Really, if it were only for these 292 reproductions the book would be a thing to covet and to treasure. Recently the Japanese in reproducing their own masterpieces have discovered the illuminating value of photographing many details on a large scale as well as the complete picture. And Mr. Yasui has applied this method with a lavishness that makes his two volumes of plates a series of enchantments and surprises. His publishers must share in our congratulations for their enterprise in supporting him. We have had a few details before in other books. Dr. Bode's, for example, reproduced small in half-tone, but here we have beautiful color-plates on an ample scale. The devout Mordian can pursue his detective studies in pages which give the master's brush-work and "hand-writing" to perfection, while simpler souls find themselves admitted to a new and intoxicating intimacy with Botticelli's mind;

*SANTO BOTTICELLI, BY YASUI YASUHIRO. THREE VOLUMES. (Mokki Society, 415 1/2 St. Mark St.)

for these "details," far from being like jewels torn from their setting, somehow bring home to us more than ever the continuous relations which pervade a master's design, and at the same time endow us with fresh eyes for the beauty of dancing lines, of clasping hands, of flowers in vesture, of some vista of landscape seen in a radiant isolation. What surprises are here too! How many experts would not be puzzled by the peacock on a rocky ledge in the Uffizi? And how many would be forgiven for thinking it to be by a Chinese or Japanese master. Besides these ravishing details we are also shown several pictures not reproduced before in the standard works on Botticelli, such as the disputed "St. Thomas Aquinas" from the Holford collection, the "Transfiguration" from the Pallavicini collection, the "Agony in the Garden" from Granada. There is also Lord Lee of Fareham's "Trinity," which Mr. Yasui has identified with the Convertite altar-piece, supposed to be lost, and for which the scenes from the life of the Magdalen in Philadelphia prove to be the model. Most writers would have made much more of such a discovery than does this Japanese critic. But though a highly competent connoisseur himself, who rightly values the achievements of scientific connoisseurship, he finds that in Europe the criticism of art is all too much under the tyranny of historical studies and the mania for attribution. Owing and acknowledging a great debt to Home, as to Mr. Bensen, though he often differs from these authorities, and from Dr. Bode, he concentrates on tracing Botticelli's development as an artist. He leaves on one side the history of the time: he is bent on penetrating to the secret soul of his subject. His first sight of Botticelli in London, before the mystic "Nativity" of the National Gallery, was for him literally a falling in love. He went to Paris, and then post-haste to Florence.

Why did Botticelli so passionately attract this Oriental mind and temperament? Sandro is indeed a painter apart, with certain predilections rare among European masters. Mr. Bensen has said that his true place as a draughtsman is with the great Chinese and Japanese masters of rhythmic line rather than with the European masters of representation. But Mr. Yasui compels us to revise some of our presuppositions. He is convinced that in the world of art the difference between East and West has been immensely exaggerated. He is in love with Botticelli, yet his admiration for Leonardo is far greater. He points out that while we are apt to enjoy in Oriental art the decorative function of line, yet the great Oriental masters used line mainly as a means of representation; and he happily addresses Dürer, the greatest master of the linear view of nature, as contrasted with Titian, who represents by means of tone. How interesting it is to find this Oriental critic vindicating the importance of representation, and protesting against the tendency, now so fashionable in "advanced" circles, to condemn any faithful representation of nature as bad art. Brought up in a world where realism has always been kept in its proper place, he has no sympathy with our extremes of reaction from it. And so, for him, Botticelli's rigorous training in the impassioned realism of his day, though against the bent of his inner nature, was of enormous value. It enabled him to paint masterpieces like the "Primavera," a "happy proof that realism is not a vital check to the imagination." Mr. Yasui thinks that Utamaro is the most kindred soul to Botticelli in the world of art (his comparison of the treatment of the hair by these two painters is delightful and full of insight); but Utamaro for him remains a minor master, just because in Japan he missed that training in the real study of nature which gave Botticelli the necessary foundation for the expression of his powers.

We cannot follow our critic in detail through his examination of his subject, but we may note one or two points of interest. Mr. Yasui, who writes more exact and sensitive English than many English historians of art, seems to move with familiar ease in the atmosphere of European culture, but brings always a fresh eye and mind to the problems of Quattrocento art. He contends that the main stream of the art of the period was toward

the analytical study of nature, thus accentuating the linear element in painting; and Lippo Lippi, for example, is in this main stream, not a reactionary, while Masaccio, with his grand and broad "tonal" conception of nature, stands apart from this main current and finds his true following only in the Cinquecento. While insisting on the immense significance of the realism of Florentine art, Mr. Yasui never forgets that Botticelli's inner nature was alien to it. Herbert Home, it will be remembered, strove to correct the sentimental view of Sandro's art by reviving a phrase used by a contemporary, who wrote that he was praised for the "aria virile" of his figures. Home would have us think that this was how he appeared to his contemporaries. But Mr. Yasui shrewdly points out that the document is a comparison of the relative merits of a few painters only—Perugino and others—all of whom were certainly less "virile" than Botticelli; it is not an absolute characterization. And Mr. Yasui is far from denying the strong sentimental element in the artist; he treats "the sentimental Botticelli" as a phase in his development from sensuousness to idealism.

All this tracing of the movement of an artist's nature is done with an admirable tact and delicacy. We have read with especial enjoyment the chapters on special elements in Sandro's art—his treatment of landscape, of hands, of hair, of flowers, of drapery. Flowers play so important a part in Oriental art that what Mr. Yasui has to say about them is of particular interest. "Botticelli's flowers were highly artificial in arrangement and yet at the same time strangely real." How is this? Botticelli was extremely sensuous, but he was not a "realist."

Realism proper is the intellectual attitude, which aims at grasping the mechanical organization of Nature; sensuous appreciation cannot be so precise, but is not less real; . . . the sensuous attitude may be more profound in its penetration to Nature than intellectual realism. . . . Fra Angelico's flowers are "seen" flowers. . . . Fra Filippo's flowers are flowers conceived, not merely objectively seen; flowers with heavy, sharp-edged, and wet. Botticelli's flowers have the qualities of both masters. His rhythmic eye rescued them from becoming a formless mass of stimulants to the senses as in Fra Filippo, and arranged them in aesthetic stylized designs. Botticelli was the best flower-painter the world ever produced. This is an astonishing avowal for a countryman of Sotatsu and Korin, and we find it a little hard to accept. Not that Mr. Yasui is indifferent to the classic art of his own country—far from it. He suggests that there is an intimate connexion between the sentiment for landscape in the Florentines of the Quattrocento and that of the old Teosa school and the school of Korin, pointing out that the Japanese "remain naturalistic to the very end, only translating their love of nature into strangely pictorial design." And his comparisons with Utamaro by no means undertake that wonderful painter of feminine form.

Utamaro's figures are sometimes curiously elongated and even distorted. It seems that he, as well as Botticelli, felt a force in woman essential to her nature, and the fascination it exercised on those sensitive artists made them unwittingly deviate from a cold objective contemplation of her form. . . . All his ravens tended to what I may call the etherealization of the senses.

Ethereal sensuousness! That is our Japanese critic's name for the distinctive quality in Botticelli; and with a sensitive sympathy he brings out the peculiar feeling for living form which the reproductions in this book so vividly illuminate. Thus of the Zephyrs in the "Venus"; "There are tiny souls in hands and feet and they are playing hide-and-seek among these sweet moving lines." And of the "Annunciation": "The solemn message emanates from the anc's open hand; it must be received; it must travel its course; the awed Virgin, helplessly extending her receiving hand, draws with her body a corresponding curve." "In dramatic situations, which Botticelli preferred in his last years, the hair is so well used for passionate expression, it appears almost to weep and to fear."

"Draperies are insensate substance, but as our relation is so intimate we spontaneously project our own senses into them, and they become our outer skin. This extremely sensuous nature of clothes appealed immensely to Botticelli." The garments of the Grace in the "Primavera" "love and cling to secret limbs as if alive." We quote a few phrases from chapters which should be read complete not only for their novelty of approach but for their exceptional insight. Mr. Yasui notes "the

happy expedient, so peculiar to Botticelli, of expressing flight by long stretched legs, placed closely together." How we regret that in all his book there is no mention of Blake, in whom the same "happy expedient" is frequent; we should have liked to have his impressions of Blake's art, as compared with Botticelli's latest phase.

In discussing that last mystical stage of Botticelli's career, Mr. Yashiro gives a preponderant importance to the artist's prolonged study of Dante. The "Divine Comedy" was a spiritual revelation, and contact with it changed him "from a plastic painter to a religious mystic." And this change seriously undermined his technique as a painter. Mr. Yashiro contends that working on a small scale, as Botticelli did in the Dante drawings, contributed to this undermining process. For once we are inclined to disagree. Creative natures often rebound from one form of expression to another, and are refreshed by the contrast. But no doubt Botticelli was never so at home with himself as in the Dante designs. His instinct for linear expression, his taste for curves (and Mr. Yashiro has some admirable pages on the *tondo* form, in which Sandro is supreme among painters) could here be liberated; and a corresponding instability makes itself felt in his works on a larger scale.

We have cited a few of the analogies with Oriental art which give this book a special interest, over and above its many other recommendations. Some readers, no doubt, will hope to learn that Botticelli was inspired by some direct contact with Eastern paintings. Of this there is neither evidence nor likelihood. There is a school of criticism which seems unable to conceive that similar temperaments and similar views of the world, however widely separated from each other, will find similar expression for themselves. Such critics are not happy unless they can trace an "influence." If they find that some convention or decorative motive occurs in two different arts or artists, they assume that one must be borrowed from the other. Often this is the case; but such borrowings need by no means imply anything worth calling an "influence," still less an essential ingredient. Botticelli, like other Italian painters of his time, no doubt saw Oriental stuffs and wares and enjoyed their decorative designs. But we do not for a moment believe that any Oriental work of art had any formative power upon his mind. He had a natural kinship with certain artists of the East, and that finds inevitable expression in his art. Why should we seek for literal confirmations of that kinship? Mr. Yashiro is right: "Art is universal. Beyond the limits of time and space, an artist may be waiting for a friend from a distant land."