

Chinese Influence on Japanese Art

This report is being given at a time when the newspapers are telling us of the construction of a Japanese section in San Francisco and telling us, in their usual “exciting” but uninformative manner that Horyuji is part of Nara. If you went to Japan you would find these places are on opposite sides of a range of hills and while the geographical mistake is not important, the historical factors are. For it was at Horyuji that the first Buddhist monuments were constructed in Japan.

It is very difficult and perhaps not necessary to distinguish between the Chinese and Buddhist contributions to Japanese art. But it is important to bear in mind that neither the Chinese nor Japanese are analytical people and however different they are from each other they bear certain resemblances in the ways they differ from us. That is to say, their tendencies are toward what we call integrational synthesis and eclecticism.

From the artistic point of view we may regard Buddhism as a vast religion which rose from an early analytical, naturalistic setting to a massive integrating, symbolic and almost abstract series of complications from which in turn there were derivative analyses into what we call the Japanese Buddhist sects. In China all Buddhism tended toward a synthetic eclecticism which is both complicated and quite unnecessary to unravel.

Even this explanation would be unnecessary excepting to say that the art of Horyuji resembles to a remarkable degree that of Ajanta in India. What is more the study of Buddhist arts as a whole run contrary to the philosophical explanations given in books by Western authors and if you want to read these books you will be generally confused, though you may enjoy it. While if you look at pictures, even photographs of ruins, you may get some ideas without any explanations being needed.

Buddhism is more than any other a religion of peace and this is reflected in its curvilinearity. At Ajanta one sees two approaches: the natural social events of the people used as sources of inspiration, and the geometrical representations both of the statues and the ceiling decorations. The use of floral decorations on the ceiling is common to all Buddhist analytical sects regardless of their theology or metaphysic. One sees this at Ajanta, Horyuji and even at late periods in Kyoto.

In tracing Chinese influence in Japan we have two quite different things to consider: (a) The Chinese as originators; (b) The Chinese as transporters of Indian, Greek and Scythian elements. And in turn they were brought to Japan, a land of rectilinearity. Mr. Schaeffer himself is one of the authorities on the rectilinear architecture of Japan, where the right angle has been carried to an extreme as the basis in construction.

Prince Shotoku Taishi, 573-621, was the chief pioneer in the introduction of Buddhist and Chinese cultures in Japan. Much of the first Buddhist culture was not Chinese but Korean. This included the arts and sciences connected with Bronze working, the construction of large palaces and temples and changes in the roof both in sloping and in details.

The original Japanese seem to have had peaked roofs which are more like those of the Malays, shingled or flat or tiled. The curved roof is definitely an importation from China whether through the Koreans or not. But the first temples also bear some relation to those I have seen, in ruins, in the Gandhara country and came from Central Asia through Korea and not basically a Chinese contribution.

The first Buddhism in Japan included elements of both the analytical, southern Theravadin teachings and the cosmic, synthetic, Mahayana. The second is known because by it the Bodhisattva, or Buddhas in-esse are pictured and some of the best ones are found at Horyuji and Narva, not too far from Kyoto.

The next most important factors come through a single man, Kukai or Kobo Daishi, who lived from 774-835. He is the founder of the Shingon Japanese sects which are very complicated, ritualistic and aesthetic, and their basic teaching is that of **fullness**, that everything is, and that everything is made of light. One must bear in mind that for our purposes we can divide the Buddhist art into those who accept:

- a. Forms are, and are real.
- b. Light is and forms result from the activities of light color and shade.
- c. Forms are accidents.

The second view is also supported in part by Mr. Schaeffer.

The Shingon ritual includes the use of many metallic musical instruments and this is where both the Chinese music and Chinese metal work entered the scene, both being followed almost immediately by Chinese architecture, painting, ceramics and other arts. At Koyasan, a mountain on a peninsula to the Pacific side of Kyoto and Kobe, one finds many of the original temples built in a somewhat Chinese style. But Kobo Daishi also synthesized the traditional Japanese methods we call "Shinto" with Buddhism. This led to the construction of temples in wooded areas and the preservation of trees and forests which distinguish Japanese from much of mainland Buddhism.

Whereas in Ajanta and Horyuji one finds the floral decorations on the ceiling and pictures of human activities on the walls, at Koyasan, the Chinese painting is introduced, fanning in two directions.

One of these is the picturization of figures of Bodhisattvas who are now deified archetypes and not necessarily human. The forms are either androgynous or geometrically-symbolic or both carried to

an extreme, and then softened out into quasi-human forms. This re-humanization, however, took place more under the influence of what is called Tendai Buddhism which is totally synthetic and integrating.

Under Kobo Daishi's influence the Swastika became totally symbolic in Japan. Actually the swastika was not so much an esoteric symbol but a blue-print representation of the Indian village. The word "gram" still persists, representing a living unit, like a cell, but shaped differently. The eight parts were the eight streets or lanes of a typical Indian village and Shingon Buddhism is full of Indian elements.

But at Koyasan we find the introduction of wall decorations. These started out originally as religious themes but the Chinese and lay elements increased and then one sees the rise of the Rano School. The tree takes the place of the anthropoidal human or god or bodhisattva, and the natural scenery takes the place of social activity.

There is one distinct difference between Chinese scenery and Japanese—the Chinese used a curvilinear space and one could see it even recently when we had an Indo-Chinese artist show his paintings at the school. The Japanese never fully assimilated this curvilinear space, although it is also, in another sense, Indian. But the Japanese did adopt the Chinese geographical-drama paintings depicting journeys, people walking and even dynamic history in art forms. This came to its fulfillment in Sesshu, 1421-1507, he being one of the greatest of Japan's artists.

The Kyoto period was contemporary to the T'ang Dynasty in China and it was the period also of the best good-will between the two countries. It was the introduction of ceramics on a grand scale and the building of the first really good kilns in Japan from which period on the Japanese, both by adaptation and invention, progressed to this day.

Around the year 1300 the court was transferred from Kyoto to Kamakura, or rather the power passed over to the shoguns and military from the nobles and emperor. This was the rise of the extreme analytical Mahayana groups, whose theologies need not concern us, and a return to suitable simpler art forms. And also the rise of Zen Buddhism.

Practically, Zen is based on the reality of calmness, peace, serenity and blank space. The Zen Masters however, not being analytical, brought in Flower Arrangement from China which is basically Confucian and Occult, but not Buddhistic. The principles of Heaven, Man and Earth are universal. But they play a tremendous part in the Japanese mores and folk-aesthetics. It is to be pitied that some people have taken seriously *The Lotus and the Robot* by Arthur Koestler who missed the whole tenor and trend of these arts.

Probably all religions teach that the universe arose from universal stillness. The stillness is real, broken occasionally by activity. The present theories or discoveries in Physics are coming very close to this and were predicted to me by a Chinese Buddhist in Hong Kong and fulfilled within a year by the awarding of Noble prizes in Physics to Chinese.

The Tea ceremony is based on harmonious activity within this universal calmness. The Sand Garden illustrates harmonious manifestation also. The Tea ceremony however is dynamic while the Sand Garden, with rocks, is static. The influence of these is so great that they have penetrated all Japanese sects and folk arts.

The next contribution of Zen is that of the encouragement it has given to folk-arts themselves. Every Zen monastery is an individual effort and along with all the elements of metaphysics, ritual and discipline is the down-to-earth fact that in the Zen monastery laundry work, building maintenance, wood carving, etc., are preserved. Even Prof. Daisetz Suzuki was downgraded to me by the top spiritual teachers of both the Soto and Rinzai sects. And the lectures and books written about Zen by people who have never undergone the training or discipline overlook entirely the discrete training in interior decorating, woodcraft, metal craft, often carried on privately or secretly within the temple compounds. My own observations have been that most of these came through China, but were not necessarily of China. Japan has received the last elements of Greco-Gandharva, and Scythian-Mongolian arts.

One of the greatest contributions to Japan came from the Southern Ch'an school of China. This was not only a Southern school; it was a "sudden" school. The belief was that manifestation came suddenly out of the unseen. Meditation was necessary and out of the unseen potential came the kinetic.

This was exemplified by outline drawings and sudden brush strokes. Sometimes an artist would take a long time before doing anything and then work with great spontaneity. The fewer the strokes, the better both the technique and the composition itself. We now have it at the Rudolph Schaeffer School taught by Mr. Gaskin and sometimes there have been whole projects based on this method or approach. Many of the great compositions of both China and Japan belong to this school. It was later on also adapted to porcelain in painting, silk screens and other art-forms.

The final great contribution of China came with the downfall of the Ming Dynasty in China early in the 17th century. This saw the flight of many scholars and monks to Japan, the most important being the establishment of the Ch'an sect in Japan under the name of Obaku, Pan-chen in Chinese. Their chief temple is on the plain not too far, but slightly north of Kyoto and Kobe. The architecture is distinctly Chinese. Instead of the rectilinear Tori-gates, there is a great circle in the wall, as the entrance. Trees are left and the ground is kept clear. The Japanese prefer shrubs or even herbaceous weeds.

Whereas at Koyasan there were walks and ceilings all decorated, the Chinese building is full of windows, even on the ceiling. The Shingon Buddhists have light-shining-in-the-darkness in their ceremonies; the Obaku Zen School has its universe-of-light reflected in its architecture. Whereas most Japanese temples have paintings all over, the Obaku school prides itself on its huge vases, displayed both as art objects and also to hold flowers. Long-stemmed Chrysanthemums are used when in season.

Although Zen sects tend toward simplicity, the Obaku School uses mats and cushions and sometimes these are decorated. But all Buddhist schools tend to preserve the Chinese costumery of the period and most of them depart far from the Yellow Robe of Southern Buddhism or even the modified robes of the Thibetans.

Colors therefore appear in Japan:

- a. Natural, from the flower blooms themselves.
- b. Naturalistic, in paintings particularly on walls, screen, and silk hangings.
- c. Chemical—mostly metal derivatives used in ceramics and tiles.
- d. Dyes—used in costumery, silk backgrounds, etc.

The Hindus themselves do not seem to have developed a color sense. The Chinese, following the basic Chinese tradition of five elements, tended to depict sharp contrast colors. But the Japanese, who seem to be particularly sensitive, toned down the Chinese colors and introduced all sorts of minor tones, or tertiary colors unheard of in either China or India.

Chinese art ran into its own Baroque and Rococo periods under the Manchurian-Ch'ing dynasty and so it did not influence the Japanese very much until a later day. All the Chinese components from the pre-historical times to the Ming are preserved in Japan and much better than anywhere else. But my own conclusion is that looking at pictures or traveling in the country is much better than writing explanations.

Or, from a practical point of view, to study the work of our own Campbell & Wong who have synthesized the Chinese-Japanese arts for the people of our own time and place.