THE SPIRIT OF JAPANESE PAINTING

By JUPPO ARAKI

Which of us living in East Asia has not contemplated Japanese paintings with reverence and aesthetic enjoyment and reflected upon the spirit of this unusual art? But when the wish arises to supplement one’s own ideas with reading matter on this subject, we discover that for those unacquainted with the Japanese language there is little to serve as a key to the spirit of Japanese painting. We therefore believe that the following article will be appreciated by all those interested in art.

Juppo Araki, the son of Kampo Araki, the great painter of the Meiji Era, is, at the age of seventy-one, one of the four or five outstanding and best-known contemporary painters of Japan. He is head of the Kachiku-ha (flowers and animals) school of painting, a member of the Imperial Academy of Art, and his works are to be found in the leading museums of the world.

In the following pages, Mr. Araki has given expression to the profound insight attained in a lifetime of creative activity, illustrating the text with his own sketches.

—K.M.

In East Asia the art of painting has always been the subject of lively discussion. Even a thousand years ago noteworthy treatises appeared, and ever since then innumerable books have been written on this subject. But as most of them treat the subject of painting in a peculiarly Oriental manner, that is, abstractly and by indication only, they are, unfortunately, difficult to understand, not only for Europeans but also for most Asians not conversant with the subject.

I have reflected upon this for many years and have tried to outline my own conception of art as distinctly as possible and to avoid the weaknesses of former treatises.

Time and again I have been asked by Europeans: Just what are the nature and technique of Japanese painting? I have assembled here a few thoughts which, especially to non-Japanese readers, may offer some hints for the understanding of Japanese painting.

THE LIVING PRINCIPLE IN NATURE

The Creator has made all living things in Nature and granted them the faculty of shaping their lives within the limits of fixed forms. Consequently, each living creature possesses its distinctive traits which it preserves throughout its life, enjoying complete freedom within these divinely ordained bounds.

The will to live is the very essence of all that is animate. The external form and activity that correspond to this will to live must be regarded as the true manifestation of the living creature concerned. Every living creature manifests its spirit most truly when it most completely fulfills its destined functions.

Hence the visible characteristics of a living creature are determined by its spirit as well as by its functions. In other words, a proper conception of any living thing is possible only through the accurate comprehension of these two factors: its physical properties and its spiritual content.

BEAUTY (HARMONY OF CONTRASTS)

There is no end to the beauty in Nature, and the meaning of art is to select and reproduce that which is most striking among this wealth of natural beauty. One possibility of discerning it is provided by the contrasts contained in Nature. If we set the two colors red and blue side by side, our vision conveys to us a stimulus, resulting from this contrast, which produces a definite emotion. However, as long as we deal in contrasts only, we cannot speak of beauty. Only when the
contrasted colors, in spite of their contrast, are in a certain harmony, do we have an impression of beauty.

The degree of beauty depends on the degree of the quantity and quality of the above-mentioned harmony of contrast. Hence the most perfect beauty will be found where harmony exists under the best possible conditions.

LIGHT AND SHADE, AND THEIR INTERPLAY

Among the most diverse contrasts found in Nature, the decisive one is that of light and shade. The harmony between light and shade contains a multitude of gradations, each one producing a different effect of beauty according to its quantity and quality. The different varieties of beauty in Nature are, so to speak, the product of the different harmonies between light and shade.

This harmony of contrasts is, as it were, the fundamental principle of my theory of art as well as a sort of philosophy of mine. Art, however, is nothing but the beauty contained in Nature—i.e., the harmony of contrasts existing in Nature—expressed in form.

OBSERVATION

Art must turn to Nature for inspiration and subject matter, and it goes without saying that Nature is the basis and origin of all works of art. Hence the artist must constantly devote himself to the observation and study of Nature. Observation should not be confined to the surface; it must penetrate to the core of the subject. Only after one has exhaustively studied the nature and functions of the subject can one claim to have really understood it. Let us take the bird as an example. First we must collect all manner of data concerning its organism, its way of living, and its habits. On the basis of this preliminary knowledge, we make many sketches in order accurately to grasp the relation between the nature and the functions of our subject. While thus thoroughly studying the physical structure of the bird and its various movements and activities, we gradually get to know the real nature of the bird. Now the true nature of the bird has somehow become tangible to us.

Since we are now fully acquainted, not only with the bird’s physical structure, but also with its specific nature, we are justified, on the basis of this knowledge, in giving free expression to our conception of the bird. The appearance of the bird is to us no longer static but is founded on infinite changes. This means that in painting, too, we have limitless possibilities of expression.

SIMPLIFICATION

The more closely and accurately we study the subject, the more perfect will be our comprehension of the entity of beauty. Since, however, it is impossible to reproduce all the details observed, we must select the most typical ones and assemble them to form a whole. The task consists of rendering the subject in the most simple and yet most perfect manner.

This assembly is made according to the theme to be painted. Those elements that have remained after all others have been sifted out appear in the painting. But the sifted-out elements—i.e., those elements which are not reproduced in the picture—are nevertheless not so negligible that we can completely ignore them in the composition of the whole. As an aid to the elements actually reproduced in the combination of form and art, they are incorporated and indicated in Japanese painting. The fact that some elements are not reproduced, I call “deformation.” However, the deformed elements are not actually dropped; they live in the background as something unformed and yet full of meaning. Thus these two elements are in reciprocally necessary organic and continuous relation to each other.

Let us suppose, for example, that a line has been broken off and carried on after a new start. Is the blank part a senseless empty space? No, it is still a line. To all intents and purposes, the broken ends meet across the gap to form a continuous line. In the mind of the
THE WORKS OF JUPPO ARA

"Sea of Clouds": a typical example the "limitlessness" in Japanese painting.

"After the Rain": a beautiful sun

coreres and proportions.
THE ARTIST AND HIS WORK

"Old Veteran"

"The Mystic Peace of Light"
BEHOLDER, THE GAP IS BRIDGED. THUS THE
DEFORMED PART INDICATES SOMETHING AND
HAS BECOME ALIVE IN THE IMAGINATION OF
THE ONLOOKER.

THAT PART WHICH IS SACRIFICED FOR THE
SUBJECT AND FOR THE ARTIST'S PURPOSE, PLAYS
THE ROLE OF A DEFORMATION IN ORDER TO
EMPHASIZE THE REMAINING PARTS. IT IS
DUE TO THESE AIDS BEHIND THE PICTURE THAT
THE REPRODUCED PARTS BECOME A LIVING
WHOLE.

ACCORDING TO THE TRADITION OF JAPANESE
PAINTING, THE DEFORMED PARTS MUST BE
INDICATED BY STROKES. CONSEQUENTLY, THE
MOVEMENT AND THE RECIPROCAL RELATIONS
BETWEEN THE STROKES MUST ON NO ACCOUNT
BE MEANINGLESS.

A PAINTING WITH MEANINGFUL INDICATIONS
AND WHICH IS PERFECT IN OBSERVATION AND
DEFORMATION IS WORTHY OF BEING CALLED A
JAPANESE PICTURE. THIS IS ONE OF THE
MOST IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS OF PAINTING
IN JAPAN. THIS IS ALSO THE REASON WHY
JAPANESE PICTURES, IN COMPARISON WITH
EUROPEAN ONES, ARE CONSIDERED ABSTRACT
AND SYMBOLIC. AS FAR AS THE ACTUAL
NUMBER OF STROKES IS CONCERNED, JAPANESE
PAINTINGS ARE MORE SKETCH-LIKE THAN THOSE
OF THE WEST. BUT THEY MAY BE ALL THE
RICHER IN MEANING, BOTH EXPRESSED AND
SUGGESTED. THIS IS WHY JAPANESE PAINTING
IS CALLED "SPIRITUAL."

IN COLOR, IN FORM, IN SHORT IN ALL THE
CONSTRUCTIVE ELEMENTS OF JAPANESE PAINTING,
THE SIMPLIFICATION DESCRIBED ABOVE IS
EMPLOYED. SPIRITUALLY AS WELL AS MATERIALLY,
REPRESENTATION JUST STOPS SHORT OF
COMPLETION, ALLOWING A CERTAIN LATITUDE
TO THE IMAGINATION. THIS MEANS THAT
JAPANESE PAINTING IS ABLE TO LEAD THE
THOUGHTS OF THE BEHOLDER INTO REALMS FREE,
INFINITE, AND MYSTIC.

SKETCHING

IN ORDER TO COMPREHEND THE SPIRITUAL
AND MATERIAL QUALITIES OF A SUBJECT, WE
OBSERVE IT CLOSELY; BUT IN ORDER THAT WE
MAY ACCURATELY RENDER THE KNOWLEDGE
THUS GAINED, SKETCHING IS INDISPENSABLE.

IF WE OBSERVE A SUBJECT FROM DIFFERENT
ANGLES, SKETCHING IT REPEATEDLY AND COR-
RECTING EACH SKETCH UNTIL WE ARE SATISFIED
WITH IT, THE MENTAL CONCEPTION OF THE
NATURE OF THE SUBJECT GRADUALLY CRYSTAL-
LIZES; ITS CHARACTERISTICS AND FUNCTIONS
GROW MORE AND MORE DISTINCT. WE MUST
NOT FORGET, HOWEVER, THAT THE SUBJECT
SHOULD NOT BE REGARDED AS A MECHANICAL
EXISTENCE. UNLESS WE CONSIDER THE SUR-
ROUNDINGS AND THE ATMOSPHERE AND THE
CONDITIONS OF TIME AND PLACE, WE CANNOT
EXPRESS THE NATURE OF THE SUBJECT.

SKETCHING IS THUS THE FOUNDATION AND
MOTIVE POWER FOR PRODUCING A PICTURE.
SKETCHING IS THE MAIN REQUIREMENT FOR
THE DEVELOPMENT OF PAINTING. WE PAINT-
ERS IN THE JAPANESE STYLE SKETCH INDUS-
TRIOUSLY IN ORDER TO BECOME GOOD ARTISTS.

FINAL SKETCH

THOUGH CONSTANTLY ENGAGED IN SKETCHING
IN ORDER TO EXPLORE NATURE, THE PAINTER
MUST ALWAYS LET THE SUBJECT ITSELF
EXERT ITS INFLUENCE UPON HIM SO THAT HE
MAY FORM A PICTURE OF HIS PARTICULAR
THEME. ONCE HE HAS CONCLUDED HIS
THOROUGH STUDY, HE MUST DECIDE ON THE
MOTIF, FORM, AND SPIRITUAL CONTENT OF THE
PICTURE ENVISAGED. TO PUT IT MORE CONCTE:
LY: IT IS NOT ENOUGH THOROUGHLY TO
EXAMINE THE SUBJECT BY ITSELF; THE
ENVIRONMENT, IN SO FAR AS IT IS AFFECTED BY
IT, MUST ALSO BE STUDIED. ON THE BASIS OF
THIS EXAMINATION, THE FINAL PLAN FOR THE
PICTURE IS DRAFTED. THIS SKETCH (CALLED
SAKUZU OR SHITAUZ) IS THE FINAL
PREPARATION FOR COMPLETING THE PICTURE.
IN DESIGNING IT, THE ARTIST TAKES ALL KINDS OF DETAILS
INTO CONSIDERATION.

BEFORE A PERFECT WORK OF ART IS CREATED,
AN ENORMOUS AMOUNT OF EFFORT IS SPENT
OVER THIS FINAL SKETCH. IT IS NOT UNUSUAL
FOR HUNDREDS OF SUCH PRELIMINARY SKETCHES
TO BE MADE. IN THE COURSE OF THESE
REFLECTIONS AND STUDIES, THE MOTIF AIMED AT
GRADUALLY GAINS IN PURITY, AND VARIOUS
ELEMENTS ARE COMBINED AND MORE EMPHATICALLY
INDICATED. ONCE THE BEST AND MOST SUITABLE ELEMENTS HAVE BEEN FOUND,
ALL THESE PREPARATIONS ARE CROWNED BY
BEGINNING THE FINAL WORK. AND, UNDERTAKEN IN THIS SPIRIT, A POLISHED AND INSPIRED
WORK OF ART WILL BE ACCOMPLISHED.
THE IDEALISTIC PAINTING

In Japanese painting there are two methods of representing a subject: that of rendering its intrinsic idea and that of representing its outward reality. By the first method, the rendering of the subject’s intrinsic value is given prominence, while the reproduction of its external appearance is simplified and stylized. Yet this material side is by no means neglected; it is merely indicated as an unreproduced part of the whole, in order all the more strongly to emphasize the presentation of the abstract.

In this idealistic painting, the main part is played by intuition and thus the individual method of applying the brush. In ink-drawings as well as in colored paintings, the outward form is simplified. Consequently, the movements of the brush are all the more important. No line may be made too quickly, or too slowly, or indecisively. There must be no trace of meaningless brushwork. The creation of a truly idealistic painting depends entirely on meaningful brushwork executed with utmost concentration. It is by this method of painting that Nature is rendered most artistically, and one can say that this style is the most important one in Japanese painting.

ART

A painter must be able to do all these things freely and without hesitation. I call this ability true art (Jutzu), to distinguish it from mere skill or technique.

A picture consists entirely of physical matter. In order to create artistic impressions by means of this inanimate matter, some kind of implement has to be employed. The only implement in Japanese painting is the brush. Ever since it was invented thousands of years ago, its faculties and limitations have been thoroughly explored. Consequently, the development of Oriental painting has been determined by the faculties peculiar to this brush. The painter’s ability of representation is necessarily closely bound up with these faculties. He must fully explore the faculties of the brush before he can make use of it. While, however, the faculties and the spirit of the brush must not be neglected, care must also be taken lest the brush hinder the painter’s intrinsic powers of representation. These two factors must be brought into accord in the world of art, and it is every artist’s task to open up this world through un­tiring effort.

Although this world of art is created by brushwork, the brush has ceased to exist in it as a separate entity. This world reaches beyond the distinctions between brush and painter. That is the ideal world of art where I and my brush become one. The brush is thus no longer an implement but part of the painter himself.

THE SPIRITUAL NATURE OF JAPANESE PAINTING

The fundamental characteristic of Japanese painting can in the final analysis be traced to the representation of the spiritual. The development towards this characteristic spirituality can be explained by the following two points:

(a) by the color. The color used in Japanese painting is not identical with the real color of the subject reproduced. The Japanese artist tries to perceive the essence of his subject’s color and to represent it in absolute purity. This desire originates in a demand of the Japanese spirit, which yearns for spiritual beauty and seeks something more sublime than the actual color. The subject is refined and idealized through beautiful colors. The painter is not tied to the natural color and is able to give free expression to his inspiration. Naturalness is sacrificed and sublimated in order to provide latitude for the painter’s desire for spiritual expression. The extreme of this tendency and method is represented by ink-painting. In it, the whole complicated scale of color shades is expressed by a single color, that of ink. A noncolor contains all the other colors and renders them by indication. Here something is born out of nothing.

(b) by the line. Color is only of secondary importance compared with line, and it is not too much to say that the
spirit of Japanese painting is most profoundly expressed through line. Now the line is determined by the brush. Hence the principal element of Japanese painting can also be traced to brushwork. Brushwork, however, is not the movement of the brush but the movement of the spirit; not the result of the motions of the hand, but harmony between spirit and hand. This only makes it possible to reach the peak of art in the way we see it. At this height, brushwork loses its meaning as soon as any part of any stroke deviates from tried and fixed rules. The subject and the individual nature of the brush determine the drawing of the lines. Thus it is chiefly by means of line and color that Japanese painting aims at spiritual expression.

DRAWING THE ORCHID

In East Asia, the orchid, the bamboo, the plum, and the chrysanthemum have since time immemorial been called the "Four Lords" and have been the favorite themes for practising line-drawing. This is not merely some formality of custom but has a profound theoretical reason. I should like to explain this by the example of the orchid.

The orchid, in its natural form, displays the most simple and concrete beauty of the curved line. Each petal shows a variety of charming and colorful curves. One flower standing by itself describes a gentle curve, but as soon as there are many together they show different phases of a great variety of lines. However, if these lines are more closely studied in their parts, it becomes apparent that every curving line contains straight lines or consists of curves resembling straight lines. The harmonious synthesis of the most varying lines forms their subtle beauty. Harmonious form is always an ideal synthesis of straight and curved lines. In this sense, the orchid is an example of an ideal combination made up of seventy per cent of curves and thirty per cent of straight lines. The more straight lines there are, the greater is the effect of the whole form, and vice versa. (In the case of the bamboo, the ratio between curves and straight lines is the exact opposite. Here we have seventy per cent straight lines and thirty per cent curves.)

Let me amplify what I have said with the aid of a few sketches. I shall do so through the medium of the black-and-white technique of ink-drawing, as this technique represents the most simple and, at the same time, the most sublime form of Japanese painting.

In Fig. I you will see that all the strong and hard parts of the plant have been rendered in deep black, while all the soft and delicate parts are reproduced in lighter shades. Now I should like to ask you to let your mind dwell on the composition of the sketch and to direct your attention towards two main aspects: the first concerns the slant of the leaves and flowers and their relative position; the second concerns the number of leaves and flowers and their numerical ratio.

As regards slant and position, it may be remarked that all the elements in the sketch radiate in a well-balanced and unobtrusive manner so that, in spite of their common source and harmonious entity, the impression arises of every unit, every leaf, and every flower losing itself in space.
All that I have said about so wide a subject as Japanese painting is based on my own personal opinions and insight that have matured during my long life as an artist. I shall be glad if I have succeeded in offering the reader a glimpse into the secret corners of my workshop and into the background of my creative work. Perhaps one or the other reader will be able from among these thoughts, which are given only incompletely and by indication, to seize upon the connecting link, that very "spiritual line" leading to the true nature of Japanese painting.

As regards numbers and numerical ratio, I should like to remind the reader that, in the Japanese feeling for proportion, the numbers 7, 5, and 3 play a role more or less similar to that of the number 2 (i.e., part and counterpart) or the ratio of the sectio aurea in Western feeling. From my point of view, I should like to call the numbers 7, 5, and 3 the "aesthetic numbers."

Thus you will find in Fig. I seven picture elements, that is, five leaves and two blossoms. Of the five leaves, three incline to the right and two to the left. So even in this picture, which is reduced to the most simple components, the numbers 7, 5, and 3 are alive. Incidentally, the same rules apply to the Japanese art of flower arrangement.

With Fig. II, I have tried to show that these same numbers 7, 5, and 3 recur even within the various picture elements in the movement of the lines, that is to say, in the proportion between straight and curved parts. Of the five leaves one is absolutely straight; in the next three the ratio of the straight line to the curve is 7:3, 5:5, and 3:7. Finally, the last leaf is a complete curve. At this point, I should also like to draw the reader's attention to the fact that the scale of these leaves corresponds to the five stages or degrees of vitality and maturity of the leaves. It should, however, be remembered that, even before reaching full maturity, the leaves occasionally bend forward under their own weight.

Quite aside from the aesthetic principles just explained, the painter will also strive to achieve in his plant-painting a good balance between old and young, strong and weak, maturity and growth (compare the leaves and especially the flowers of Fig. I). Even from a purely technical point of view, the tempo and dynamic of the brushwork changes according to whether a young, vigorous, and upward-thrusting plant element or a wilting one is to be represented. The more tired a leaf, for example, the slower and shorter become the motions of the hand guiding the brush, and the slighter its pressure.

Finally, in Fig. III, I wish to show how Japanese painting, in its urge for extreme simplification, for economy in expression, and for the avoidance of all superfluity and crowding, often makes use of what I should like to call the "spiritual line." This line is just as important as the one actually existing in substance.

I am convinced that one of the most typical as well as one of the noblest features of Japanese painting is this very preference for the "spiritual line," which, by a mere indication, allows the beholder to trace in his own way a line into the infinite.

All that I have said about so wide a subject as Japanese painting is based on my own personal opinions and insight that have matured during my long life as an artist. I shall be glad if I have succeeded in offering the reader a glance into the secret corners of my workshop and into the background of my creative work. Perhaps one or the other reader will be able from among these thoughts, which are given only incompletely and by indication, to seize upon the connecting link, that very "spiritual line" leading to the true nature of Japanese painting.