DANCING, THE ART OF ARTS

By LILY ABEGG

It is one of the aims of our magazine to contribute toward our Western readers' understanding of the nations of East Asia. We believe that the following article will give a surprising new insight into the spirit of Japan from a little-known angle.

Dr. Lily Abegg, who has contributed before to this magazine, spent the first twelve years of her life in Japan and is now living there again. Her familiarity with this country, and the fact that she is a trained journalist of high reputation, make her particularly well qualified to write this article.—K.M.

SOME twenty years ago, a leading European student of the theater wrote that the sensation being created at that time in Europe by the Russian Ballet was nothing compared to the impression that the first Japanese theatrical troupe would make. What attracts this expert and many other Westerners to the Japanese theater is probably first of all the surprising discovery that there are still, in this world which we believe to know so well, highly developed forms of art about which Europe knows next to nothing. Japanese theatrical art is entirely different from our own, and this difference is to be found not least in the supreme importance attached in Japan to dancing and the whole play of gesture and movement. This highly developed play of gesture and the cult of the dance—which, in the Japanese theater, sometimes reduce the spoken word, the facial expression, and the ever-present accompanying music to something of almost secondary importance—seem to us wholly astonishing, indeed, a new revelation of art.

The question arises, why the theatrical art of Japan has nevertheless remained unknown in Europe. There are various reasons for this, the chief among them being that of cost. Naturally, the great Japanese actors, who are at the same time the most famous dancers, need an adequate background for their performances. This means taking along the entire stage settings, including the scenery; for a Japanese samurai cannot very well appear in a French château or a German feudal hall. The number of trunks needed by a Japanese actor for his many magnificent costumes would amaze his European colleague. In addition to the actors, the musicians, the narrators, and the stage hands would have to go along, and it is not difficult to calculate that the journey of such a troupe halfway around the world would require a considerable sum of money.

Beside these practical difficulties there is yet another serious one. Even if the European is capable of enjoying the performance with his eyes, he is seldom able to do so with his ears; for the European finds it hard and takes some time to get used to Japanese music and to the other accompanying sounds, as, for example, the barking cries or the clacking of pieces of wood. In view of this, the presentation of performances to a public that is totally unacquainted with the East would constitute a certain risk. This is also the reason why the exhibition of Japanese dancing alone, without the dramatic background of the theater, would, on the whole, hardly be effective, since in that case many aids toward conjuring up a Japanese atmosphere would be lacking.

PROFOUND MEANS OF EXPRESSION

In Japan one does not have to go to the theater in order to see dancing. Everyone who has been to Japan knows the geisha dances and may have seen
dance performances at sacred shrines or, in the summer, the Bon-Odori in the country. Those who have spent some time in Japan gradually begin to realize that dancing has an entirely different and far greater significance in this country than in the West, and that the Japanese possess in dancing a means of artistic expression which we in our Western world have never cultivated to a like extent. And finally we also come to comprehend the spiritual content of Japanese dances, whether in the heroic atmosphere of the Kabuki stage, in the meditative philosophy of the No plays, or in the intimate contact with Nature of the folk dances in summer.

It is this spiritual content which is the chief characteristic of Japanese dancing. Neither the brocaded and silken luxury of the Kabuki, nor the simplified, refined beauty of the No plays are an end in themselves: they are only the means for expressing ideas, feelings, and problems. In Japan a talented, differentiated people of culture has employed dancing as one of its chief means of expression, and hence it is hardly surprising that the achievements in this field surpass those of other peoples. If we can regard the advanced development of music as an outstanding mark of Western culture, dancing may be called the mark of Japanese culture. In Europe it is music which not only creates its own effects but has also taken possession of the stage and literature; in Japan it is the dance which has taken possession not only of the stage and literature but also of music. Music by itself is to be found more rarely than in the West. There are no concerts of Japanese music; music and dancing usually belong together.

SYMPHONIES OF DANCING

Where we compose or perform music to give expression to our feelings, the Japanese likes to express them through dancing. Of course, this statement must not be taken either as universal or absolute; for, after all, Japanese dancing is also accompanied by music. Moreover, the Japanese has, just like us, many other means of artistic expression, such as literature and painting. But this much can be said: Japanese music does not occupy the same place in Japanese culture as our music does in our culture. The high level occupied in the West by music is occupied in Japan by dramatic dancing, while the music itself is ranked lower. (Here we must emphasize that we are not speaking about quality but only about the ranking within each culture.)

Thus one might say that in Japan the No dramas take the place of our oratorios and symphonies. One could continue with such comparisons by placing the dances occurring in Kabuki beside the arias in our operas or beside the great monologues in our plays. The relationship between Man and eternity, the religious emotions and spiritual revelations which our great composers of past centuries have expressed in their music, are immortalized in Japan by dance dramas. The works of Seami, the great master of No whose five-hundredth death anniversary has just occurred, are just as significant for Japanese culture as the works of Bach are for ours.

In this short survey we cannot deal in detail with the No drama, about which, incidentally, a great deal has already been written. Let us only say that in the No drama the emphasis is sometimes placed on the dance, sometimes on the music, and sometimes on the words. Always, however, the entire play of gesture and movement has been worked out to perfection. Hence it is quite impossible to gain an impression of this art simply by reading the No plays that are available in many translations. It would be exactly like reading the text of an opera without knowing the notes and the music. (This does not, of course, imply anything against the literary quality of the No plays.)

THE CULT OF MOVEMENT

To explain Japanese dances to someone who has never seen any is just as impossible as to speak about color to a blind man. But even Westerners who
ANCIENT DANCES IN JAPAN

Kagura dance performed by women at the Kasuga Shrine in Nara. The Shinto-Kagura dances are probably the oldest dances in the world still to be performed.

A scene from a No play. The leading part is that of an old sorcerer, played with a mask.

Bugeku dance at the famous Meiji Shrine in Tokyo. These dances, which were developed more than a thousand years ago under Buddhist influence from the Asiatic mainland, are always presented on a special platform.

Uzumon Ichimura XV, the 70-year-old President of the Japanese Actors' Association. In the photograph on the left we see him in a Kabuki play in the part of a handsome young samurai (left), with 51-year-old Kusairo Matsumoto VIII playing the part of a fierce warrior.
NATION OF ENTHUSIASTIC DANCERS

Kikugoro Onoe VI, an outstanding dancer and actor, in two of his parts. Above we see him as Mat-sunomaru, the samurai in the play *Tezokoshi* which is mentioned in the text. The photograph below shows him in a woman's part.

A rural New Year's dance performed by peasant women. As it is danced at the old (lunar) New Year, it also celebrates the beginning of spring.

Bon-odori dance performed in July at the festival for the souls of the dead. Here, in the mountains, it appears in the form of a round dance.

Awa-Bon-odori dance procession in the streets of Tokushima, famous for its Bon-odori. Although a number of the women participating in this particular dance procession are specially costumed, everybody can join in.
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have often seen Japanese dances sometimes find it difficult to cure this blindness; for most of us are not accustomed to the language of dancing and so do not understand it. Like any other highly developed form of art, the understanding of Japanese dancing requires study; it requires devotion and interest.

If a people prefers dancing as a means of artistic expression, it must possess a pronounced feeling for the movements of the human body. The Japanese possess this feeling to the highest degree, but—in contrast to the Greeks, for instance—exclusively for gesture and movement and not for the human body as such. They are interested in the beauty of movement, not of the body. This explains why no dancer ever performs lightly clothed or half-naked: the costume is of great artistic significance for the emphasizing of gestures. For a Japanese dancer it is not especially important whether he has a good figure or not. The famous dancer Kikugoro Onoe VI with his rather stocky build and hint of a bull neck, looks in private life more like a successful businessman than a leading disciple of Terpsichore.

The cult of movement is still far more pronounced in Japan even in everyday life than in other countries, although modern times have effaced much of it. One cannot remain dignified when running after a tram. But in daily contact with the Japanese one is still struck by their superior bodily control. It is also significant that to this day the Japanese regard the movements of Westerners as hasty, uncontrolled, and ugly or even funny. They are guided in their judgment in this respect not only by ethical but also by aesthetic considerations.

MONOLOGUES OF GESTURE

On the stage, the difference between the Japanese manner and ours is especially apparent. In the well-known Kabuki play TeraKoya, a samurai replaces the son of his lord by his own son, so that the latter is killed as a hostage. The spiritual struggle and the suffering of this man and the final victory of feudal loyalty are expressed on the Japanese stage chiefly by gestures. In Europe this scene would doubtless have given occasion to lengthy monologues or dialogues about paternal love, loyalty, and the inexorability of fate. On the other hand, a Japanese Hamlet, for example, would never express his emotions by lengthy speeches; he would indicate the feelings of the famous “To be or not to be” mainly by gestures or perhaps even by a solo dance. One must remember that the best-known Japanese actors are also at the same time always the most famous dancers.

But it would be wrong to think that Japanese theatrical art is a kind of pantomime; for the actors also speak, only that these words are not of paramount importance. The Japanese stage presents real, pure theater, in that every theatrical means of effect is employed: magnificent settings, costumes, dances, gestures, music, singing, spoken words, and even a narrator who describes the happenings on the stage. The Japanese plays have actually little to do with literature, although there exist dramas of a high literary standard, such as those of Chikamatsu, known as the Japanese Shakespeare.

STAGE AND PROFESSIONAL DANCING

Although it is not always easy clearly to distinguish between professional and folk dancing in Japan, we can count among the professional dances those performed by actors and geishas as well as such religious dances as those in which leaders or semiprofessionals take part. Most of the dances, however, which are performed in sacred shrines or temples are folk dances, as they are executed by members of the respective communities.

In the performances of the Japanese stage, which used to last all day but which have now been cut down to four or five hours and which often include solo dances, one classical dance is always given, performed by one of the great masters, such as Kikugoro Onoe VI or Mitsujiro Bando V.

The geishas, next to the actors the main exponents of professional dancing,
generally perform the same or similar dances as their male colleagues, but in their ordinary kimonos instead of special costumes. Sometimes they also perform folk dances or some new popular dance or other, such as the air-raid precaution dance or the humorous dance of the soldier from Tokyo who returns from the front and tells of his deeds in the flippan Tokyo manner. The geishas usually perform in restaurants in private circles and appear on the stage only on special occasions. Thus, since the Meiji Period, it has been the custom in Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto for the geishas to perform spring dances in large theaters during the spring, such as the Miyako-Odori in Kyoto (usually known to foreigners as the "Cherry Dance").

Actors and geishas attend the same dancing schools, of which the leading ones date from the eighteenth century or somewhat later. Even the men first learn the women's dances because, so the Japanese say, it is then comparatively easy to learn men's dances. Instruction usually begins in early childhood, and at least fifteen to twenty years of practice are necessary before the actor can present a passable figure on the stage. The great masters Koshiro Matsumoto VIII and Uzaemon Ichimura XV, two of the most brilliant stars of the Kabuki stage, are both in their seventies, while Kikugoro and Mitsugoro, whom we mentioned before, as well as most of the other leading dancers and actors, are in their sixties. Ennosuke Ichikawa II, who is well over fifty, is still regarded as a "promising young star." In the case of classical lovers, the woman is usually played by a sixty-year-old man and the man by an actor more than seventy years old. Since the spectators attach little importance to facial expression and thus to the face itself, age is of no consequence: what is essential is the art of movement, which happens to be mastered best by experienced actors.

In order to enhance the theatrical effect and to efface individual features, the make-up is applied so thickly that one speaks of Japanese make-up masks. Real masks, however, are used only in No plays. The fact that no women appear on the classical Japanese stage can be traced to a ban that was lifted long ago; nevertheless, recent attempts to present actresses on the stage met with no approval. The Japanese claim that a female impersonator is more effective on the stage than a woman, as women are too small and their features too delicate. They add that woman's social position and education today are different from those of olden times, and that the type of modern, modest womanhood is not suited for representing the mighty heroines of old.

CLUBS RATHER THAN THEATERS

What we have just said does not apply to the No plays, the oldest and most distinguished branch of the art of drama and dancing in Japan. The No players, who were given the right five hundred years ago to wear two swords, have not since that time been ranked as actors but as knights. For that reason they were not allowed to perform in public for money, a tradition which, with few exceptions, has been maintained to this day. During the Tokugawa Period, the No stage developed into a kind of court theater. Nowadays, the No theaters are maintained by a fairly large circle of art lovers who, like the feudal princes of the past, take part themselves in the performances as amateurs. Thus it is said that the President of the Upper House, Count Yorinaga Matsudaira, is an enthusiastic and talented No actor. So the No theaters are not theaters in the real sense of the word but a sort of club which owns a stage.

Here again we have a comparison with the West. While Westerners meet in the evening to play chamber music, Japanese art lovers meet on the No stage. Benito Mussolini plays the violin for relaxation; the President of the Japanese Upper House, however, prefers to participate in the solemn gestures of a dance drama.

"CATCHING A BUTTERFLY"

In order to appreciate Japanese dancing, a certain knowledge of the movements is
necessary. Otherwise the symbolism of the dance remains unintelligible, and this symbolism is the very soul of Japanese dancing. There are definite, traditional movements in dancing which indicate riding a horse, falling off a horse, pouring tea, catching a butterfly, wandering, sowing, harvesting, fishing, changing clothes, opening a sliding door, fondling a child, chasing away a scoundrel, and the hundreds of other things there are in life. These symbolical movements must be practiced diligently in order to appear intelligible and beautiful at the same time. It is said of Kikugoro that he becomes furious when a dancer, in symbolically putting down a teacup, does not exactly take into account the height of the table. Both the teacup as well as the table are not actually there, but even so the dancer should know to a centimeter how high the table would be if it were really there.

Most of the Kabuki and geisha dances popular today were created a hundred to two hundred years ago by famous masters or re-created after still older models. To this day they are still danced just as they used to be, down to the last detail. The majority of the No plays, however, are five hundred years old, while the Bugaku plays which are sometimes performed at the Imperial Court or at some of the great Shinto shrines have even reached the venerable age of a thousand years. The traditions are passed on from masters to pupils, who are either the sons, adopted sons, or favorite pupils of their masters and who have the right, after the master’s death, to assume his name. This is why the names of the members of old actor families are numbered like those of rulers. Thus, for instance, Kikunosuke Onoe, the son of Kikugoro Onoe VI, will probably assume the name of Kikugoro VII after the death of his father.

Now and then, however (except in the case of Bugaku), new dances are added which are composed by one or other of the great masters either by giving a new interpretation to an old theme or by taking a new theme.

THE WEST CAN OFFER LITTLE

The contents of the dances, which are taken from mythology, religious life, the world of fairy tale, history, or life itself, must be known in outline in order to be able to follow the performance. Of course, the Japanese know the themes, just as we know what Wagner’s operas or Shakespeare’s plays are about. But just as we go to famous operas and plays, not only because of their contents, but also to see famous artists in the main parts, so in Japan, too, the names of the actors and dancers represent a great attraction.

Ten to twenty years ago it was believed in Japan that the classical theater and the traditional style of dancing could not withstand the onslaught of modern times and would probably give way to Western music and drama or at least to new Japanese arts influenced by the West. This assumption proved to be false. Although the new Japanese arts, especially that of the movies, have developed considerably, the popularity of traditional art has risen again during the last few years.

Actually this conservatism of the Japanese is not surprising, for there is little or nothing that the West can contribute toward the development of their own particular forms of art. The Japanese drama and the Japanese dance are forms of art that appeal essentially to the eye, so that our forms, which are adjusted more to the ear, cannot offer them much inspiration. As much new inspiration as we can offer the Japanese in the field of music, as little can we offer them in the field of pure theater.

FOLK DANCES

The Japanese predilection for the dance is especially apparent in the sphere of folk dancing. As far back as we can see in their history, these people have danced often and enthusiastically. In many respects the folk dances are more interesting than the professional dances. Although in Japan, like everywhere else, the professional dances have their origin
in folk dances, they have on the whole undergone more changes as a result of the gradual cultural development and of new themes and forms inspired by foreign influence.

It is practically impossible to attempt a short survey of Japanese folk dancing, for one can actually make only one generalization, namely, that the quantity and variety of Japanese folk dances are simply overwhelming. A recent Japanese publication goes so far as to say that it is almost impossible to write a comprehensive work on Japanese folk dances, since the life of a man is scarcely long enough even to see only once all the different dances in the North, South, East, and West of the country. The wealth of Japanese literature on dancing which has been available for more than a thousand years usually deals with individual forms or schools of dancing only.

THE LIFTING OF A BAN

Four or five years ago, in view of the war situation, a certain propaganda began against public festivals and celebrations and thus also against public dancing in the open air. This was doubtless justified, for Japanese festivals have always been connected with considerable display: whole streets were decorated with red-and-white bunting, green branches, and innumerable lanterns, and special stands were erected for musicians and performers. Above all, the former wasteful luxury in festive lighting was bound to clash with air-raid control measures and the necessity for saving electric current.

In the summer of 1942, however, the Government partially relaxed its strict attitude by permitting folk dancing in the country. It did not wish in the long run to deprive the rural population, which has little other entertainment, of its traditional festivities, and the excellent harvest of last year provided a welcome reason for breaking this rule. The result was that all through last summer the country people danced—especially the Bon dances—with more enthusiasm than for many a year, and one could feel how much dancing is a real necessity to the Japanese.

AME NO UZUME'S DANCE

The history of the dance can be followed in Japan fairly accurately from the seventh century on, and for still earlier times there are definite indications to go by. According to mythology, the origin of dancing in Japan can be traced to the dance performed by the goddess Amo no Uzume to the accompaniment of gay singing and music on the part of the other gods in order to lure the Sun Goddess out of the heavenly cave, into which she had withdrawn in grief over a quarrel with her wild brother (the legend of the eclipse of the sun). The fact that dancing in Japan goes back to purely Japanese origins, which can be proved in various ways, is thus also confirmed by mythology.

Later on, manifold, strong foreign influences were added. But throughout the centuries the basic conception has remained Japanese, and all dancing themes and forms brought in from abroad underwent a change in the Japanese sense. When one looks today at the popular lion-mask dances—there have never been any lions in Japan—one would not think that these dances came from abroad more than a thousand years ago.

Numerous, still popular dances, are of a purely Japanese origin and thus go back to the times before the great invasion of Buddhist-continental influence in the seventh century. There are dances, such as the Yamato and Azuma plays, which have probably passed their two-thousandth anniversary and which have remained alive throughout all these years. Although they are, of course, no longer danced in exactly the same manner as in the most ancient times, their present form can be traced back to the eighth and ninth centuries. These as well as other ancient Japanese dances were originally dances of young villagers, of peasants, fishermen, and horse drivers. Besides these, there are probably just as old, sacred dance dramas called Kagura,
which have likewise retained their popularity to this day.

EARLY FOREIGN INFLUENCES

The greatest influx of foreign forms of music and dancing took place from the seventh to the ninth century. The most important influences came with Buddhism from China, Korea, Cambodia, India, Manchuria, and Tibet. While the Manchurian and Tibetan influences came indirectly via Korea and China, the majority of Indian and Cambodian dances came directly from those countries to Japan. Among others, a Cambodian teacher of music and dancing, who arrived in Japan with some Indian priests in the eighth century, spent a long time giving lessons in Nara, then the capital of Japan. It is believed that Greek motifs, too, reached Japan via India.

Under these foreign influences, new dances, usually grouped under the name of Bugaku, developed during the seventh and eighth centuries, dances which in part have remained unchanged down to present times. There is no doubt that Japan possesses the oldest preserved dance dramas in the world. Many of the motifs and forms still alive in Japan, which originated abroad, have long been forgotten in their countries of origin, so that the Japanese dances represent a rich source of knowledge for the ethnographer and the student of folklore. Chinese experts have had to refer to Japanese examples when writing the history of their own theater and dance of the Tang period.

The manifold later forms which have arisen since the tenth century, as well as the present-day dances (including the professional dances in the No and Kabuki style), have developed—partly under the influence of the addition of new musical instruments—from the above-mentioned old dance dramas (chiefly Kagura and Bugaku).

KAGURA AND BON

Today the best-known folk dances are: Kagura, Bon, harvest and fishing dances, and the lion-mask dances. All these terms are, however, only collective names; for in every district these dances differ, and in some the ancient elements are dominating while in others it is the later or foreign ones.

The numerous and varied Kagura dances which, by reason of their origin, are Shintoist, with a scarcely perceptible Buddhist influence, are now often danced in the adjoining halls of the Shinto shrines instead of in the open air. The male and female dancers usually wear sweeping, antique robes and move with slow, solemn steps, unless it happens to be one of the farce-like Kagura forms. Masks are often used. The performance of these dances is usually connected with certain feast days, but they can also be performed for special occasions. They may express harvest thanksgiving or serve to invoke rain or ward off threatening plagues. In southern Japan, for instance, there is a "Good-Weather Kagura," which is danced when a ship is launched.

The Bon dances are the most popular of all folk dances. They made their appearance in the seventh century under Buddhist influence and are generally danced during the Buddhist festival for the souls of the dead in July. However, even at the time when they were being composed, these dances often merged with old existing Japanese dances, and their religious character was consequently usually thereby lost. In some places, the harvest dances, which are performed in August or September, are now also called Bon dances, although they never had any connection with the Buddhist festival of the dead. Even the traditional fishing dances of the coastal villages are sometimes included in this group. The number of these dances, so different in origin and character as well as in forms of dancing and musical accompaniment, is legion.

The pleasure the Japanese takes in dancing can be felt most clearly in summer at the Bon dances. They are always danced out-of-doors, and anyone can take part. Sometimes they are made up of special groups which, according to local
tradition, either dance at a spot near the village or form a dance procession through the streets. In some places costumes are worn or special uniform kimonos, while at others it is sufficient to tie a white cloth around one’s head. Only Western clothes, as are now usually worn by men at their work, are regarded as unsuitable.

At the Bon dances, the atmosphere of Nature in summer is just as important as the dance itself. The dancers—often the whole village community—get into a kind of ecstasy, especially toward evening, an ecstasy arising from the rhythm of the dance and the all-penetrating presence of Nature. The dancer gradually forgets his own individuality and becomes a tiny part of his beloved Japanese countryside, with its fertile, familiar soil and its mysterious world of mountains, trees, and plants. In the hot summer nights, not only the living are present, but also the dead, who come for a visit during the days of the festival of the dead. In many places, lights and little fires are lit to show the spirits the way.

In Japanese dancing we can observe the same strange phenomenon as in all other spheres of Japanese life: side by side with progressing or newly added things there are always almost archaic remainders which have not progressed but yet have remained alive, sound, and significant. In all branches of cultural life there has, moreover, always been an essentially Japanese atmosphere which, in the course of time, has developed into the Japanese style. This Japanese style, however, has meanwhile soaked up so many other influences that Japanese culture, in spite of the uniformity of its essential atmosphere, presents a picture of overwhelming colorfulness and variety. This abundance of diverse themes and forms is to be found, perhaps more than anywhere else, in the sphere of Japanese dancing.

GERMANY’S CONTEMPORARY PAINTERS

By MAX LOEHR

People usually know more about the art of the past than about that of contemporary times. The art of former ages has long been systematized and evaluated; it is taught in school, and certain generally accepted ideas exist regarding it. But contemporary art is still so close to us that we find it difficult to see it in its right proportions. Yet it has much to tell us about our own times.

Dr. Loehr studied art at German universities and is now Director of the Deutschland Institut in Peking. His article offers a small glimpse into a large topic. The examples were selected by him, not because of any outstanding value, but because they are typical and serve well as an introduction to the trends in modern art.—K.M.

MUnich, the gay capital of Bavaria, has always been an important art center. Its famous Glaspalast (Crystal Palace) contained many an international exhibition of painting and sculpture—until, a few years ago, it fell victim to a devastating fire. But Munich was soon to be compensated for this loss: the German Government decided to present the town with a new, beautifully constructed exhibition hall, and on July 18, 1937, the first exhibition was opened in this “House of German Art.” On the same day the doors of another exhibition were opened in Munich. This exhibition, entitled “Degenerate Art,” had also been assembled by the Government and presented all those manifestations of painting and sculpture that no longer had any place in Germany. Here, perhaps for the first time in history, the State actively took a hand in this sphere of life. This event meant nothing less than that from then on the State exerted a decisive influence in all questions of art.

Let us outline in a few words the type of art that was branded here as degenerate. It included products of the