Introduction to Asian Civilizations

Wm. Theodore de Bary, General Editor

Sources of Japanese Tradition

Sources of Indian Tradition
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Sources of Chinese Tradition

Sources of Korean Tradition
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Sources of Japanese Tradition
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SHIBA KÔKAN

Shiba Kôkân (1747–1818), an Edo man, was a painter of traditional Chinese and Japanese styles (especially ukyô-e [woodblock prints]) before he developed an interest in Western art and, in association with the leading scholars of Dutch studies, became an enthusiastic advocate of Western art and civilization, manifest in his work as a painter, etcher, and engraver.

DISCUSSING WESTERN PAINTING
(SEIYÔGA DAN)

The distinguished historian Sir George Saseono saw Shiba Kôkan as representing a significant rashness among educated Japanese of his day. "[He] felt that his native culture was exhausted and stale ... a man in revolt against contemporary Japanese life, ... and impressed by the material and scientific aspects of Western culture."

The following comments by Kôkân, from Discussing Western Painting (1799), reflect his sense of impatience with his own counselsmen for failing to appreciate things Western.

1. The diameter of the world is more than seven thousand miles, and the sea route circumnavigating it is over twenty-four thousand miles. The land known as the West is in the regions lying to west of China and Japan. The most distant region of the West is called Europe. It is one of the great continents and contains several thousand countries the size of Japan. One of them, the Netherlands, is divided into seven districts, one of which is Holland.

The various countries of the West all have the same style of painting. Since this style was introduced to Japan by the Dutch, and since today there are numerous examples of Dutch art in Japan, we call all Western paintings "Dutch paintings." The technique employed in this art produces a true representation of reality, greatly different from the style that is used in Japan. Many persons in Japan—among them those who paint in the traditional Chinese or Japanese technique—consider Western-style painting absurd and have no desire to learn the Western method. Not only do they think it unworthy of study, but they feel that it has no artistic value and cannot be called painting at all. They seem to think that the artistic creations of the West are mere artisanal work. This is indeed an extremely foolish notion.

The Japanese and Chinese painting that we refer to as ninja, or miniatures, painted pictures, actually come under the category of ukyô-e, or artist's work. Take, for example, the manner in which the Japanese draw hair and brush every single strand of hair is drawn individually. The Western technique of drawing hair, however, is to suggest the hair in a few brush strokes, so that the resulting appearance is one of real hair, not a mere mass of lines. In ancient times people were not concerned with the stress and character of the brush stroke. Fundamentally, a brush is a tool for drawing pictures. If one attempts to draw an ox without expressing the actual appearance of the ox, if one is concerned mainly with the impression given by the brush technique, then a mere spot of ink could just as well be called a picture of an ox.

For example, medical science cares little with medicine. Relating this metaphorically to painting, let us call medical science the brush, illness the picture, and medicines the colors. The attempt of medical science to cure a specific illness with general medicine, or the attempt of the brush to correct a picture with color, is like not knowing exactly where the illness originates or just what is at fault in a painting. The primary aim of Western art is to create a spirit of reality, but Japanese and Chinese paintings, in failing to do this, become mere toys serving no use whatever.

By employing shading, Western artists can represent convex and concave surfaces, sun and shade, distance, depth, and shallowness. Their pictures are models of reality and thus can serve the same function as the written word, when more effectively. The syllables used in writing can only describe, but one realistically drawn picture is worth ten thousand words. For this reason Western books frequently use pictures to supplement written texts, a striking contrast to the insignificance of the Japanese and Chinese pictures, which serve no better function than that of a hobby to be performed at drinking parties. . . .

2. Instead of using glue as we do to mix our pigments, Western artists use oil. This means that even if their paintings get wet, they are not damaged. These pictures are commonly called oil paintings. Although many artists in Japan have tried this technique, few have ever attained a genuine knowledge. When I visited Nagasaki a few years ago, a Hollander named Isac Thinsing gave me a book on art entitled Kunst Schilderboek. Persuing this work carried me into an intoxicating world. After a careful study of it, I finally attained a perfect command of its principles and can now draw whatever I wish with complete ease—landscapes, birds, flowers, men, or beasts.

Pictures that are intended to give information, because of the vast amount of accurate detail that they contain, are far more effective than simple words of description. All things depicted in paintings—from the great wild goose down to the tiny sparrow, and even further to the components of eyes and beads and legs—are given in shape and feeling. Even the color in plumage varies exceedingly. The written word in black and white cannot possibly recreate an accurate image of the true form. For this reason, the pictures drawn in Western countries are regarded even more highly than writing. Painting and writing both serve the same, but they are not devised merely for amusement.

3. Many Easterners consider Western art to be no more than "perspective pictures," but this belief is utterly fallacious for the reason I have stated previously. A picture that does not represent reality faithfully is not well executed.
There is far more to realistic painting than the mere drawing of perspective. Eastern paintings have no accuracy in detail, and without such accuracy, a picture is not truly a picture at all. To paint reality is to paint all objects—landscapes, birds, flowers, cows, sheep, trees, rocks, or insects—exactly as the original objects appear, thereby actually animating the drawing. No techniques other than that of the West can achieve this feeling of reality. When a Western painter looks at the work of an Eastern artist, he surely must see it as the mere playing of a child, hardly worthy of the name "painting." But when an Oriental artist, who is used to living with his wretched paintings, has an opportunity to compare his work with the distinctly superior Western art, he stupidly considers the latter merely another school of art, calling it "perspective painting." Obviously, such categorizing represents an extreme misunderstanding of Western painting.

4. Western books contain pictures made by the copper-engraving process. They have, for example, botany books (something like our medicinal herb books) in which illustrations and words are equally important for description. Without illustrations it would be impossible to obtain a clear understanding of the plant's appearance. Similarly, in order to construct an unfamiliar article, one must know its shape. What better way could there be to describe this than by means of a picture? Being realistic representations, the drawings of Western countries are executed according to the "three-face method" of shading....

The three-face method of shading in Western art must be studied carefully and understood thoroughly: (1) Keep pure white that part of the painting which is to depict objects in direct sunlight. (2) Paint in pale tones those objects on which the sun shines obliquely. (3) Paint in dark tones those objects that are shaded from the sun and are therefore dark. The effect of light and dark shadows is achieved in engraving by the use of parallel lines: when single parallel lines are used in close proximity, the tonality is light; when two sets of parallel lines are used crossing each other, the tone becomes dark. No one in Japan knew the proper method of making a copperplate. I therefore turned to the formula given in a book by a Hollander named Botes. I consulted with Osuki Goseki, who assisted me in translating the text so that I could manufacture copperplate pictures in Japan. In 1785, I produced the first engraving. Unfortunately, Asians are different in nature from Europeans, who have achieved such great skill in this art, and I could hardly hope to attain an equal perfection.

At the time of this writing I am more than fifty years old, and gradually my energy wanes. Though I have still much to learn, I should like to offer what slight knowledge I possess on the art of copperplate engraving to those whom it might interest. I therefore intend to publish another book, called Someki, which will explain the engraving technique.

5. Western artists apply their theories to a technique of precise representation, and their works cannot be viewed in a frivolous manner. There is, in fact, a specific way to look at them. Perhaps to facilitate this, the pictures are usually framed and hung on a wall. Even when a painting is to be looked at casually, it should be hung directly in front of the observer. In the picture there is always a horizon line between sky and land. The viewer should move back five or six feet to a position where the horizon in the picture is level with his eyes. In this manner perspective is expressed in its truest form, clearly delineating the foreground from the background and setting off objects in space. Often a mirror is used in looking at small pictures, giving them an even greater appearance of depth and reality.

6. Portraiture is an important art form in the West, where the faces of sages and political figures are recorded in copperplate engravings for the benefit of future generations. The portrayal of these men gives one an understanding of their physiognomies as seen by the men themselves. Again, the contrast to Japanese and Chinese paintings is striking, for without the technique of copying reality, the Eastern artist can paint only a subjective impression of an object or a face. The same man, if painted by two different Japanese artists, will appear to be two different men. Consequently, since the true form is not described, only a vague image appears. An image of grass and flowers that does not resemble the actual plants can hardly be called a picture of them.

7. The indigenous art technique of Japan and China cannot possibly reproduce reality. In drawing a spherical object, a Japanese artist will simply draw a circle and call it a sphere because he has no method for representing roundness. Being unable to deal with convexity, should he draw the front view of a man’s face, there is no way of expressing the height of the nose! This difficulty is not due to the way in which the lines are drawn, but to the total disregard of shading in Japanese art. I shall discuss the drawing of Western pictures in greater detail in a later book, called Seiyōden.

[French, Shiho Köken, pp. 171-74]