

# East-West Cultural Exchange in Art – France and the Orient in the 1880's –

By Takashina Erika

## Paris, 1885 (1) – The Funeral of Victor Hugo

Those who have stayed in Paris and have even a small interest in French literature or drama will probably have visited the Victor Hugo Museum (Maison de Victor Hugo). This house, where the poet lived from 1832 to 1848 and where he wrote *Les Misérables*, faces onto the quiet Place des Vosges in the IV Arrondissement. On display inside are items Hugo used during his lifetime, manuscripts written by him, sketches, oil paintings and photographs. In 2002, the 200th anniversary of Hugo's birth, Hugo-related events have been held all over France. The Hugo Museum, too, hosted an exhibition centering on his plays.

This Museum houses an 83 by 59-centimeter painting entitled *Funeral of Victor Hugo*. In this funeral scene, a coffin containing the remains of Hugo is drawn by horses, and the environs and background are filled with masses of observers. These include curious spectators perched in the branches of trees at the top of the picture and bowler-hatted gentlemen and ladies in veils and dresses toward the bottom. The picture is composed as if the viewer is gazing at a distant stage from just behind the people watching the scene. It is a lively snapshot in which the bustle and confusion of the crowd are almost audible. The artist probably painted the picture from a drawing he quickly sketched at the scene.

The artist who left us this light-colored drawing on silk canvas of the funeral of 19<sup>th</sup> century France's greatest poet was a Japanese studying in Paris at the time. His name was Yamamoto Hosui. At that time, Hosui, who was in his seventh year of studying Western art in Paris, was staging a large-scale one-man exhibition there – probably the first Japanese artist to do so in

Paris. But before going to see Hosui's one-man exhibition, let us first take a look at Hugo's funeral, an event on an unprecedented scale.

On that day – June 1, 1885 – both sides of St. Germain, Paris' main boulevard, were flanked by a sea of humanity. The state funeral had already started from 10:30 a.m. at the Invalides with a 21-gun salute. From 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m., the procession made its way through the center of Paris with a cannon salute ringing out every 30 minutes. At the Arc de Triomphe, the procession's point of origin, and at the Panthéon, its destination, important people representing the state, the provinces and the towns, as well as the representatives of groups of artists and overseas organizations, eulogized Hugo. The people trailing the coffin numbered in the tens of thousands.

Although the day was a Monday, the theaters and schools were closed. (It was proposed to make the day a national holiday but this gesture was dropped because of the commercial disruption that would be caused by closing down the nation on the first day of the month.) The spectators were said to number well over one million or roughly one-third of the population of Paris at the time. Behind the layers of people lining both sides of the street were those who climbed street lamps to get a better view and some even brought ladders. The crowds included many who had come especially from the regions and from overseas. One reason for the gap of 10 days from Hugo's death to the time of the funeral was to allow time for people to reach Paris from distant parts.

Going back a little, the public came to know about the worsening of Hugo's condition around the middle of May, and the front pages of every newspaper were full of Hugo for the next two weeks. On the morning of May 22,

Hugo, who had said his final good-byes to his two grandchildren, quietly passed away in peace, surrounded by his family. On the afternoon of the same day the sad news was made public, and the appearance of Paris began to change. Laborers removed their hats as a mark of respect and old people silently shed tears. Sharing in the same disappointment, high-born ladies rubbed shoulders with women of the lower classes. The death of one poet united France that day for the first time. Articles in the newspapers proclaimed: "A great sun has set into the sea," and "darkness has come upon us." A citizen of Haute-Marne in the Champagne district recalled that the "sky seemed to be suddenly covered by black clouds." He went on to record: "In Paris, the coffin was placed at the Arc de Triomphe and a wake was held all that night. I, who do not normally pray, also made my way there and prayed in my own fashion. I needed to thus pay my respects to a great man. ... A great person is one who lives not for himself but for others. A person who leads others, helps them, and is their guiding spirit." Everyone in France surely felt his death as the end of an era.

Several hours after the passing of the great poet, the sculptor Jules Dalou had already made a death mask to use in creating a bust of Hugo. The painter Léon Bonnat painted the hero on his deathbed with brush strokes bristling with inspiration. The photographer Félix Nadar photographed the room visited by death. The face of the dead Hugo was "very beautiful, pale and cold as marble." The room was decorated with flowers picked from the garden and a statue of "The Republic" sculpture by the hand of Auguste Clésinger was placed on the opposite side of the bed. Hugo's house became the sacred ground and the square where the house was located and the wide



avenue leading to the Arc de Triomphe from there were given the poet's name. From all over the world a mountain of telegraphed condolences arrived. The Tricolor with mourning band was draped from the windows of houses. From the day of Hugo's death until the day of the funeral, at least 3,000 to 5,000 people a day called by to express their condolences. ("Pilgrimages" continued even after the funeral, and by June 4, the number of people who had visited the grave at the Panthéon, which had closed its gates, had already exceeded 20,000.)

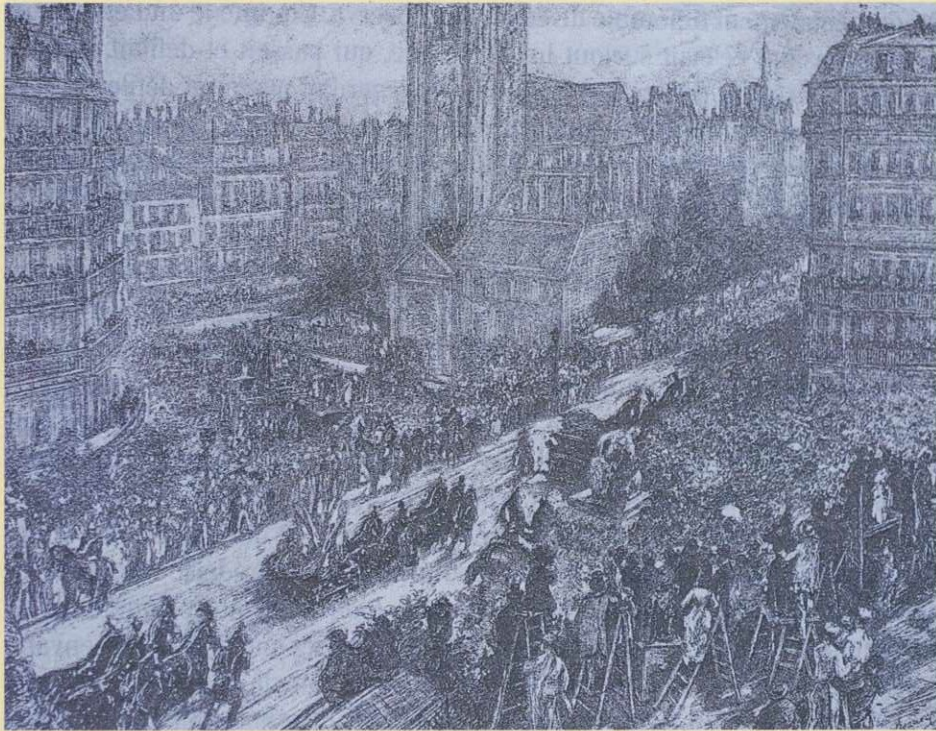
As the newspaper *Le Figaro* observed, just as the 18<sup>th</sup> century was the century of Voltaire, the 19<sup>th</sup> was to be the century of Hugo. The people who gathered at the Panthéon, the site of Hugo's grave, whispered that no funeral before had been "this magnificent, this important, and full of such glory." René Goblet said at the start of his memorial speech: "The whole world extols the honor of Victor Hugo. However, he belongs to our France. If that natural endowment is very much a universal gift, Hugo is first and foremost our own. He is one of us. He came out of our tradition and from our people." Goblet praised simultaneously the universality and the Frenchness of the poet of the anthology, *Les Orientales*.

Hugo himself left a will stating: "I do not want a religious funeral in the slightest, but bear me to



Yamamoto Hosui, "Funeral of Victor Hugo," 1885, Maison de Victor Hugo





Quesnay de Beurepaire, "Funeral of Victor Hugo, 1 June 1885," 1885

the Père-Lachaise Cemetery in the same hearse as used by the poor people." However, the wishes of the writer, already a public personage, were put aside. After a two-day debate, the French government decided on a state funeral. The funeral committee, hastily constituted by the Ministry of the Interior, consisted of 12 persons. In addition to two high government officials, the members included Peyrat, the deputy chairman of the Senate; the celebrated architect Charles Garnier, who had designed the new opera house (the opera house Palais Garnier today) built 20 years before; the painters William Bouguereau, Bonnat and Guillaume; the sculptors Dalou and Marius-Jean-Antoin Mercié; the writer Ernest Renan; and Auguste Vacquerie, chief editor of the journal *Le Rappel* and close friend of Hugo. Not one of Hugo's family and close relations was on the funeral committee however; the entire funeral was in the hands of the state.

Because of the ever-increasing num-

ber of mourners, it was decided to set Hugo's coffin at the Arc de Triomphe for a day and a night before the funeral. The person chosen to be responsible for this was Garnier. Under Garnier's proposal, the left-hand side of the Arc de Triomphe was covered by a large gauze pavilion. Surrounding the huge black coffin dais set in the center of the pavilion were numerous Paris city banners on poles. Above the victory candlestands hung flags with shield-shaped emblems, each of which bore the title of one of Hugo's works.

The route of the funeral procession was decided after endless debate. Whenever the procession paused, choirs from the Opéra Garnier and Opéra-Comique struck up funeral dirges. The musical director for the funeral was Camille Saint-Saëns. The *Hymne à Victor Hugo*, composed four years earlier by Saint-Saëns for Hugo's 80th birthday, was sung at the Arc de Triomphe until the coffin departed.

At the same time, the funeral was also a kind of celebration. As soon as

the route of the procession was announced, the owners of the buildings along the route began to take reservations for seats, ranging from several tens of francs for a seat at a window to several thousands of francs for a position on a balcony. The most expensive seats were, of course, at the Soufflot, which leads onto the Panthéon. It was as if the people were waiting for the opening of a popular play. On the day, numerous wine and food stalls appeared, and there were even people selling medals and tie pins adorned with the image of Hugo. People bought portraits of the poet flanked by two grieving goddesses symbolizing Poetry and The Republic, as well as portraits with a brief biography attached. While the city was cloaked in the garb of mourning, it was also lifted by an unusual sense of exaltation. The other hero of those sad days when Paris struggled with the grief of losing a great man was perhaps the people themselves.

The *Funeral of Victor Hugo* by Hosui skillfully captures the atmosphere of a crowd fortunate enough to be present at the spectacle of the century. The gaze of the painter, a foreigner in France, seems to be viewing the scene sympathetically, along with the French people, rather than marveling at a scene exotic to his eyes. This is not without reason; Hosui had socialized with Hugo's family. The following year, he taught painting to the wife, Pauline, of Hugo's grandson and gave her the pseudonym "Horin" (using a character from his own name). And, as an expression of his respect for the great poet, he gave the name of "Yugo" to his own eldest son born after he later returned to Japan. **JUJI**

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