

East-West Cultural Exchange in Art – France and the Orient in the 1880's – (Part 2)

By Takashina Erika

Paris, 1885 (2) – Yamamoto Hosui's One-man Paris Exhibition

On the morning of May 12, 1885, just prior to the announcement of Victor Hugo's deteriorating illness, readers found on page two of *Le XIXe siècle*, one of Paris' foremost daily newspapers, an article like this:

“Yet another medium has been discovered, which demonstrates how effortlessly the Japanese are adopting European ways. We were invited yesterday to the opening ceremony of an art exhibition at a special gallery on the Boulevard des Capucines, organized personally by Yamamoto, the artist himself, in the French fashion.... A Japanese friend of the gallery's master kindly offered his assistance ... and in his halting French, explained to us the various subjects of the works....

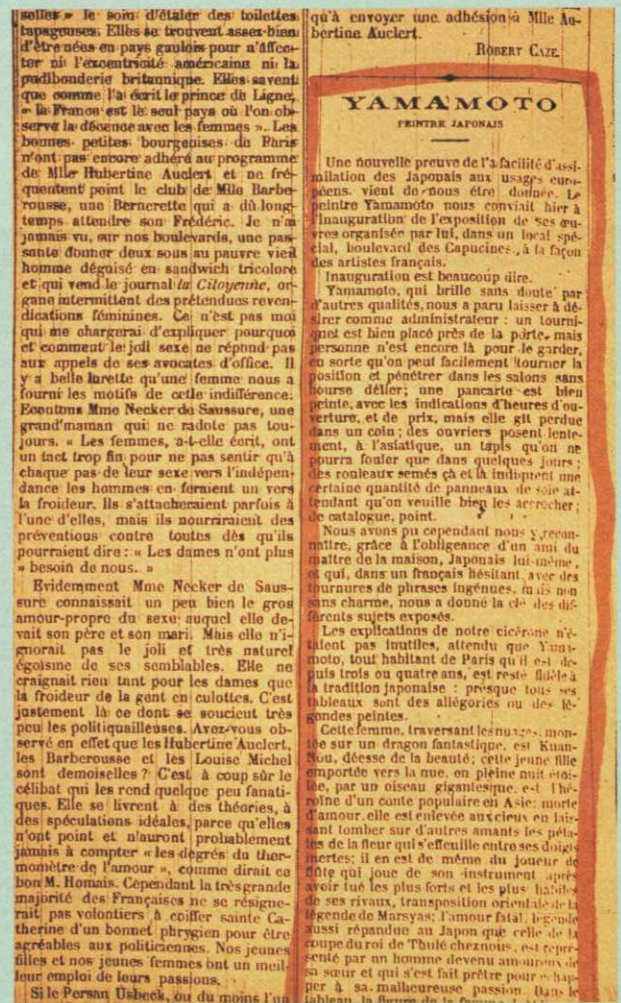
“Though having been a resident of Paris for three or four years, Yamamoto continues to be loyal to the traditions of Japan. Most of his works draw on either allegorical or traditional themes. The woman passing through the clouds riding an illusionary dragon is a *Kannon* bodhisatva, a goddess of beauty. The young maiden carried across a starry sky and up towards the clouds on the wings of a giant bird is a heroine of Asian folk legend.... He (Yamamoto) shared with us a drawing, which illustrates a mysterious dream he personally experienced. Imagine for yourself a make-believe animal spewing forth from its beak a single ray of light in which a translucent naked woman is reflected holding le Tricolore!

“There are also a few works portraying the distinctive lifestyle of the Japanese. ‘Japonais en fête’ (Japanese at a Festival) depicts throngs singing and walking along a path lined with cherry trees in full blossom. In ‘Matin d'été’ (Summer Morning), two young girls are watching the sunrise over the

window as they fold a mosquito net.... It is a charming collection of works overall, and though viewers may often be startled by the curiously strange subject matter ... it is, at the same time, a luscious and utterly decorative art exhibition with its earthy and delightful collection of paintings....” (Plate 1)

This Yamamoto Hosui exhibit, said to have included some 300 works, was not held at the Georges Petit Gallery as was theorized by researchers, but at a special gallery nearby on the second floor of 2 rue Caumartin (*Exposition Internationale*, featuring works by Claude Monet, John Singer Sargent and the like, was being exhibited at the Georges Petit Gallery at the time). From an intersection on the Boulevard des Capucines, about a two-minute walk from L'Opéra, the Rue Caumartin extends to the north. No. 2 stands at the corner of 30 Boulevard des Capucines. (Plate 2) Today, this bustling district is home to fashionable shops and airline offices, but even then it was one of Paris' most exciting neighborhoods, flanked by major theaters, including the newly constructed L'Opéra and the newest restaurants and cafés. The area also boasted many photography studios, galleries, newspaper

Plate 1



Edmond Renoir, “Yamamoto, Peintre Japonais” (Yamamoto, a Japanese Painter) in *Le XIXe siècle*, May 12, 1885, p.2

companies and publishers. The studio of the famous photographer, Nadar (birth name, Gaspar-Félix Tournachon), was at 35 Boulevard des Capucines, and it was here that the first (1874) and sixth (1881) Impressionist exhibitions were held.

Hosui's exhibition, widely publicized in newspapers and magazines, ran for a period of one month, from May 9 to

June 9. The gallery's hours were from 9:00 to 6:00. May was the liveliest month of the art season, and as Gustave Courbet and Edouard Manet had done previously, Hosui had probably hoped to attract patrons of the Salons who had gathered at the same time. In that year, however, the number of Salon audiences dwindled sharply in late May due to Hugo's sudden demise. In observance of Hugo's memorial service, the Salons closed their doors for three days. Hosui's exhibition happened to coincide with this mourning period, and as a result, was not as highly attended as anticipated. Even so, the fact that successive reviews of the exhibition appeared in the newspapers and magazines in the weeks following its opening suggests that there was remarkable interest in this Japanese artist.

The aforementioned article from *Le XIXe siècle* was written by Pierre-Auguste Renoir's younger brother, Edmond Renoir, an art writer, and was entitled "YAMAMOTO, PEINTRE JAPONAIS" (Yamamoto, a Japanese Painter). According to the article, Hosui invited him, along with other journalists and art critics, to the opening ceremony, and a Japanese individual believed to be a friend of Hosui guided them through the three large rooms that comprised the venue. Hosui himself exuded his enthusiasm and affability as he expounded on his exhibit. It is unfortunate that none of the works from that exhibition remain today (though they may be discovered at some point in the future), but by reading several articles it is possible to gain a distinct idea of the art that was displayed.

Hosui portrayed a range of genres including landscape, animals, lifestyles, legends and history. As for technique, black-and-white ink paintings on hanging scrolls, water paintings on silk and oil paintings were among his repertoire, but his main thrust was limited to Japanese themes such as dragons projecting illusions of elegant women, blooming floral scenery and carp ascending waterfalls. It seems that four oil paintings in particular attracted much attention. The May 21 issue of

L'Echo de Paris featured an article, "One Japanese Artist," which read in part, "... of the four major oil paintings Mr. Yamamoto has exhibited, the one to which I am most attracted is an elegant, allegorical work entitled, 'France et l'Orient' (France and the East). The painting possesses an extremely sophisticated color scheme and a stunningly arranged layout within his elegant originality. From a black backdrop clearly surfaces a single dragon with luminous eyes, emitting a blinding ray of light in which a supple-skinned maiden holding le Tricolore in her left hand and scattering rose petals with the other is dimly rendered....

The most moving of all the pictures was undoubtedly the portrayal of a 'Cérémonial de corbeaux' (Ceremony of Crows). In the moon's silvery glow, three birds are perched on the twisted branch of a robust plum tree in full bloom, which reaches out from an indigo blue cloudless sky...."

One art magazine wrote, "Among the works demonstrating an artful touch of the brush, bountiful palette and harmony of colors comparable to that of even our finest colorists, were a few that are worthy of the Salons," suggesting that the French audience was delighted by the exhibition and the radiance of the colors was eye-pleasing. Many of the paintings were labeled "property of ..." or "property of Madame..." – hinting that Hosui's works were popular with the art collectors of that time.

The May 16 issue of *Le Temps* read, "When Japan's artists become westernized, the paintings they produce are

heavy and threatening to the unique delicacy of Japanese art. When western artists become Japanized, they risk being superficial. The amalgamation of these is difficult, but I would like to see Yamamoto succeed in this challenge someday." As exemplified by this sentiment, there were some critics who anticipated the harmony of eastern and western elements in Hosui's works.

Referred to in several articles as a "Frenchman of the Far East" and a "Parisian of Tokyo," Hosui, it seems, assimilated effectively into the French society and the Parisian surroundings, and was even accepted by those around him. It is likely that both Japan, his birthplace, and France, where he trained in western art, were important to Hosui at the time. His desire for amiable relations between the two countries is best illustrated in "France and the East," which is a depiction of Hosui's dream, alluded to in the two previously men-

Plate 2

Photo : Takashina Erika



2 rue Caumartin as it looks today

tioned articles. From the title, it is evident that le Tricolore and the naked woman represent France, and the dragon is a symbol of Japan and the East, but exactly where did Hosui's idea for this construction originate? There is in

eastern art a concept called "Kannon Bodhisattva Riding the Dragon," and in the same period, Kawanabe Kyosai also created a Japanese painting on that theme. Harada Naojiro, who studied in Germany at the same time that Hosui

was abroad, upon his return to Japan also unveiled his oil painting, "Kannon Bodhisattva Riding the Dragon," which was the subject of debate (Plate 3), but the notion of a nude woman within a ray of light spewed forth by a dragon did not exist in the tradition of Buddhist art. The woman scattering flower petals is an image reminiscent of the theme of "scattering flowers," which has a long history in Oriental and Eastern art. The action of "scattering flowers" is an ecumenical image of "delight," "benediction" and "reverence" that is common to both east and west. Therefore, Hosui's "France and the East" can be regarded as an allegorical depiction of the happiness and hope arising out of a fortuitous encounter with another culture.

As Hosui acquired his authentic oil painting skills, he was not merely blindly absorbing western culture. He remained faithful to the traditions of Japan and also attempted to integrate the two. In his pursuit to learn from a country with heterogeneous skills and culture, Hosui maintained a modest attitude, but he did not look down upon his own culture. Rather he relished completely the convergence of the two arts, dissimilar yet both so rich in tradition. Among the students studying abroad during the Meiji era (1868-1912), there were many who worked hard but associated only with their fellow Japanese students and took no interest in exchanges with the local citizenry. Overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the western world, some other students lived in a day-to-day state of depression. Hosui was proud to be Japanese, and that pride did not falter. It was as if he strutted down the streets of Paris in his samurai garb. Thus, he went on to serve as a bridge linking Japan and France. **UJI**

Plate 3



Harada Naojiro "Kannon Bodhisattva Riding the Dragon," Gokoku-ji (deposit to the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo), 1890, H272.0cm x W183.0cm, oil on canvas

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