

East-West Cultural Exchange in Art – France and the Orient in the 1880's – (Part 4)

By Takashina Erika

Poèmes de la Libellule – The marriage of poetry and paintings

No one can forget the name of poet Judith Gautier as a leader of orientalism in France in the latter part of the 19th century. Born to Théophile Gautier, a poet known for, among other things, *Émaux et Camées*, and the Italian singer Ernesta Grisi, Judith, as a child, was surrounded by first-rate literary figures including Gérard de Nerval, Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Flaubert, the Dumas (father and son), Edmond de Goncourt and Théodore de Banville, and was brought up in Paris' most artistic and liberated environment. For Judith, who was an adolescent during the era in which the world's fair had just begun exhibiting various cultures of the world, the fascination with Oriental culture came early. This was partly because Théophile Gautier had hosted a Chinese person in his home for some time. At the age of 22, her first book, *Le Livre de jade*, was published, followed by a number of literary works including *Le Dragon impérial*, *La Soeur du Soleil*, *Fleurs d'Orient*, *Le Paravant de soie et d'or* and *Les Parfums de la Pagode*, which include stories and poems inspired by oriental countries such as China, Japan, India and Persia. In fact, in her entire lifetime, she never traveled further east than Germany, but Judith, with her boundless imagination, was able to create literature that was sprinkled with the scent of foreign lands, and in 1910, she was the first woman to be selected as a member of the Académie Goncourt.

It is not known exactly when Judith, born in 1845, and Yamamoto Hosui, a Japanese painter five years her junior, encountered each other for the first time, but it is believed that they met immediately after the 1878 Expo through Emile Bergerat, who was both

Plate 1



Advertisement of *Poèmes de la Libellule* in *Le Rappel*, May 1885

the managing editor of *La Vie Moderne* and Hosui's collaborator, and was also married to Judith's younger sister.

From May to June of 1885, the following advertisement ran for a period of three weeks in *Le Rappel*, a Paris newspaper.

Judith Gautier / *Poèmes de la Libellule* / polychrome large print art / illustrations by Yamamoto / polychrome large print art / in-4 deluxe volumes / price: 50 francs / available at Gillot Co., Rue Madame No. 79, and the residence of Madame Judith Gautier, Boulevard des Champs-Élysée No. 108 (Plate 1)

Poèmes de la Libellule, which literally translated means "Poems of the Dragonfly," was a deluxe collection of poems with illustrations featuring 88 ancient Japanese *waka* poems translated into French, along with excerpts from the *kana* preface of *Kokinshu* (Collection of Ancient and Modern Japanese Poetry). Judith oversaw the poetry, and Hosui drew the illustrations. As for the translations, Saionji

Kinmochi, an acquaintance of Judith's who was studying in Paris, first rendered a literal translation of the original Japanese works into French, and Judith then arranged them poetically. "La libellule" was, of course, symbolic of Japan itself, which had long been called Akizushima because of its elongated shape.

On the cover of *Poèmes de la Libellule*, which was made of sky blue paper embossed to resemble crocodile skin, was illustrated a single dragonfly on a branch of bamboo and the words "Poèmes de la Libellule par Judith Gautier / Illustrés par Yamamoto" in French. Opening the book, a blue dragonfly and a white wild chrysanthemum painted in the Japanese style are found inside the cover. The dragonfly is situated on the upper right corner of a square paper board (Plate 2), and the caption in French reads, "Poèmes de la Libellule traduits de japonais D'après la version littérale de M. SAIOIZI Conseiller d'Etat de S.M. l'Empereur du Japon par Judith Gautier Illustrés par Yamamoto" (Poems of the Dragonfly; Interpreted by Judith Gautier based on a

literary translation by Mr. Saionji, Senior Councilor to the Emperor of Japan; Illustrated by Yamamoto). The dragonfly's "wings" are four strips of paper board and on each was written Japanese characters meaning "Poèmes de la Libellule," "Spring 1884," "Written by Judith" and "Illustrated by Yamamoto." This is likely to be the work of Hosui, who was evidently quite witty. This drawing on the cover, which cleverly merges art and words, introduces the brilliant cornucopia of poems in their entirety along with the illustrations within.

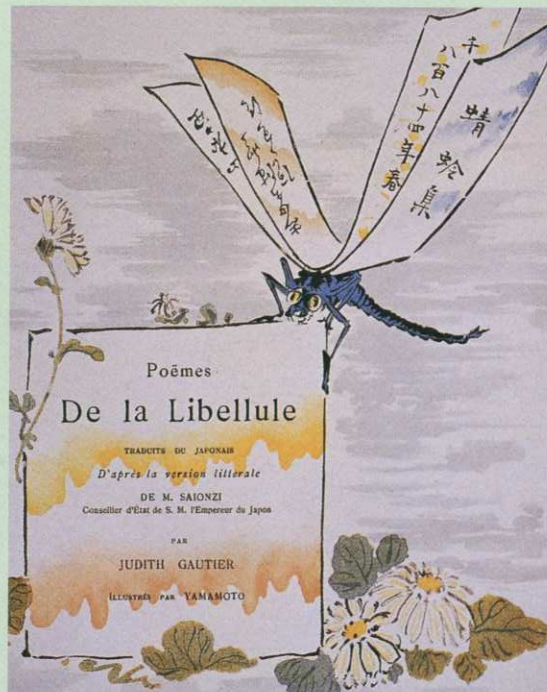
The 88 ancient Japanese waka poems were selected mainly from *Kokinshu* and *Shin-Kokinshu*, and others were taken from *Shuisho*, *Kinyoshu* and *Senzaishu*, which are all poetic compilations. Saionji's literal translations are presented at the end of the book. On each page appeared one poem in a 5-7-5-7-7 syllabic structure, for a total of 31. Through Judith's amazing poetic instincts, these were effectively transformed into dignified French pentameter without altering the 31 syllabic structure of Japan's *tanka* poems.

The illustrations that Hosui created to

accompany these poems included seven full-page color works (Plates 3, 4 and 5) and eight smaller monochromes (dragonfly, bush warbler on plum tree, bamboo leaf, moon and bird, waterfall, bat on pine tree, snowy scene and goose in reeds) which were repeated in variations on several pages (Plates 6 and 7).

According to one magazine article, *Poèmes de la Libellule* sold for 50 francs, and a total of 800 were printed. Of these, 20 copies were deluxe limited edition copies autographed by Judith, featuring original watercolor paintings by Hosui, loosely bound with ribbon and encased in a wooden box designed by Hosui. These were specially priced at 200 francs. *Poèmes de la Libellule* commanded the interest mainly of art collectors and the intellectuals surrounding Judith at the time, and the collection was both purchased and presented as a gift. Judith's friend, the painter,

Plate 2

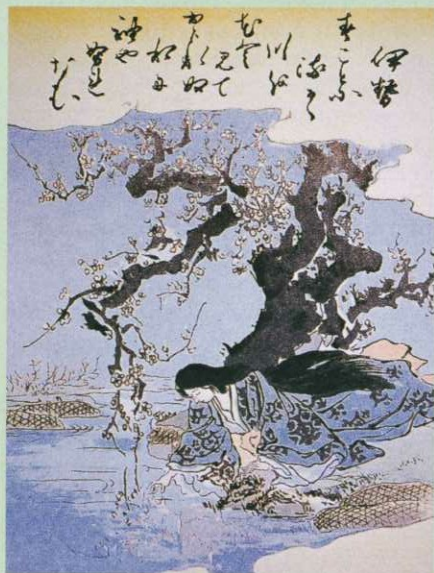


A blue dragonfly and a white wild chrysanthemum painted in the Japanese style inside the cover of *Poèmes de la Libellule*

Gustave Moreau, for instance, had reserved a copy.

The same article mentioned above raved that *Poèmes de la Libellule* was "sufficiently beautiful on the exterior, but turning the cover, one is astonished

Plate 3



Ise in *Poèmes de la Libellule*, polychrome

Plate 4



Sosei in *Poèmes de la Libellule*, polychrome

Plate 5



Narihira in *Poèmes de la Libellule*, polychrome

Plate 6

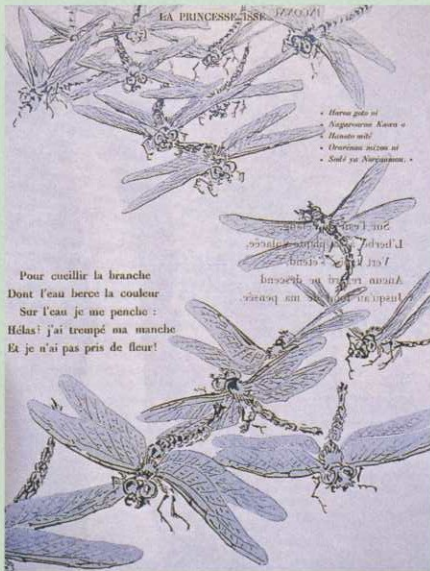
Ise in *Poèmes de la Libellule*, monochrome

Plate 7

*Poèmes de la Libellule*, monochrome (waka composer unknown)

beyond belief. It could not be possible to produce a more creative book with more imagination than this. ... The illustrations include storks, bats and dragonflies in flight, scenes of moonlight and spring wells, chirping birds and bamboo forests and are rich in Japanese scenery. All blend together flawlessly and are printed with an array of harmonizing colors." But what people especially took notice of was the coupling of Japanese waka poems and illustrations, that is, the harmony of poems and pictures. And one critic wrote in the newspaper, "There is nothing quite as elegant as these *Outa* (Japanese poems in French). Each one of them consists of five brief rhymes conveying hopes, confessions, regrets and life's lessons, like jewels embedded in a chain of gold. The syllabic rhythm of the poems, alternating from five to seven, is extraordinarily unique. They are a cross between our four-lined verse and sonnets. Our illustrations can only partially express the content of a verse, but there are few things more delightful than the marriage of these poems and illustrations in terms of consciousness and visual effect. It is for such works that Yamamoto was selected as a col-

laborator. This Parisian from Tokyo was chosen to help us understand this Japanese woman in Paris."

Riding the wave of Japonisme, the popularity of *Poèmes de la Libellule* made its way to Italy. It was Gabriele D'Annunzio, a writer renowned for *Trionfo della morte* (The Triumph of Death), among other works, who introduced the book. Beginning with his review, printed in the June 1, 1885 issue of *Tribuna*, D'Annunzio, who had just begun to take an active role as a budding journalist, elaborated in detail on *Poèmes de la Libellule* in his series of articles on the subject of the Japonaiserie trend that was fashionable in Rome at the time. In addition, he even went so far as to present his self-composed Japonaiserie poem entitled *Uta* (Japanese poem) in the *Western Style*. D'Annunzio gave his utmost to publicize *Poèmes de la Libellule*, even praising it as the rarest of rare works and a genuinely artistic book. The illustrations in particular, he said, were "truly masterpieces and compel the reader to wonder if the blossoming poems were written by the painter or if the paintings were drawn by the poet." One article referred to the young

Japanese painter, Hosui, who had traveled to Paris four or five years earlier to study Western painting, as "one who is taking on the difficult challenge of joining two forms of art." This article also mentioned that Hosui's one-man show had been exhibited in Paris for the past few weeks. And another article praised the *Poèmes de la Libellule* simply as a poetic painting, saying, "each of the pages are decorated with a host of pastel shades resembling water colors, with plum trees blossoming, bamboo branches reaching out, birds and insects flying, idealistic scenery coming to life and tiny poems singing." One might sense that his comments echo those of the Japanese art lovers of Paris, whose appraisals had an influence on D'Annunzio's understanding of Japanese culture. It is likely that D'Annunzio learned of the book through Goncourt, who was believed to be an acquaintance, and other Japanese art enthusiasts in Paris, but it is without question that he enjoyed the book's content.

Philippe Burty, a pioneer credited with introducing Japanese culture, wrote a long article for *République Française*. In reference to Hosui's illustrations, he wrote, "owing to the fine skills of publisher, Gillot Co., the ideas native to Japan have been reworked in an exceedingly French style." As for Hosui's one-man exhibition, which was taking place at about the same time, Burty said, "His training in France has led him down an erroneous path from which he cannot retreat, and the delicacy of his imagination has been lost." Having deeply loved Japanese traditional art, it seemed that Burty was critical of its Westernization. **UJI**

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