

# East-West Cultural Exchange in Art

## – France and the Orient in the 1880's – (Part 5)

By Takashina Erika

### Summer 1883, Saint-Énogat, France

On the coast of Bretagne in northwest France, the small town of Dinard sits at the base of a peninsula jutting out into the English Channel. Dinard was originally a small fishing village adjacent to Saint-Énogat. But in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, American and British tourists discovered it as a beach resort, and in the final years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is said that the town gained wide popularity and was likened to Brighton in the United Kingdom. Visitors were charmed by its scenic beach, ideal for sea bathing and the natural uncultivated locale, which made for a perfect summer resort destination. Numerous villas were built along the road that hugs the gently curved white sand beach. One of the villas, which still stands today in its former white elegance, was the home of Judith Gautier. (Plate 1)

Judith, a poet as well as an enthusiastic Orientalist, acquired the house in the latter part of the 1870s from Albert Lacroix, Victor Hugo's publisher. In the early half of the 1870s, Judith, whose marriage to Catulle Mendès, a budding critic, had come to an end, left Paris and sought emotional solace by decorating a comfortable retreat for herself at the home known as "Pré des Oiseaux."

Many artists and literary figures came to "Pré des Oiseaux" as Judith's invited guests. They took a special liking to the small annex built in a corner of the garden. Robert de Montesquiou bestowed upon this simple rectangular building the befitting names "Cigar Box" and "Hat Box." Pierre Loti wrote *Aphrodite* in this annex in late July 1893 and later, Claude Achille Debussy began composing *La Mer* here. (Plate 2)

Plate 2

Photo: © Osamu Kumasegawa



A small annex in the corner of the garden of Pré des Oiseaux

Plate 1

Photo: © Osamu Kumasegawa



Pré des Oiseaux

It was in the summer of 1883 that Yamamoto Hosui, at Judith's invitation, visited the villa and was a guest for a period. That he and John Singer Sargent exchanged their respective portraits of Judith during this time is well known. And on the wall of this annex, which later inspired so many artists, Hosui painted a decorative mural, presumably as a gesture of gratitude.

Hosui's mural was based on a typical Oriental motif consisting of bamboo, a Japanese plum tree and a pine tree paired with sparrows and cranes. The murals done in oil paint adorn three walls of the room at the center of the annex. Having been neglected for over 100 years, they are somewhat soiled and dusty, but the works themselves are extremely well preserved and the colors remain vivid. The pine tree, bamboo and plum tree, referred to as the "three mates that withstand the winter chill," seem to symbolize the friendship that the poet and the Japanese painter shared.

The overall composition of the murals is bamboo and sparrows, the plum tree and warblers and mountain birds, and a pine tree with cranes.

On the south wall are depicted green bamboo and sparrows. (Plate 3) Four sparrows, chased by a fifth, are flying through the bamboo, which is momentarily swayed by a strong gust of wind. The last sparrow is painted over a doorway leading to a small adjacent room on the south side, and on the west side of that doorway extends a single plum tree branch. Two pheasants perch on the curved part of the bough (Plate 4), beneath which a warbler is flying in the direction of the sparrows. The plum tree branch, conforming to the corner of the room, is bent at a sharp angle and adjoined to its trunk on the west wall. Hosui's decorations do not extend up to the ceiling, but the branches reaching out from the thick

Plate 3



The mural painted by Yamamoto Hosui on the south wall of the annex – green bamboo and sparrows

trunk of the plum tree are covered with blossoms in full bloom, and the first petals beginning to flutter down are also depicted. (Plate 5)

On the west side, a large window opens onto the garden. The plum branch extends upward above this window, and the pine tree on the north wall reaches out as if to receive it. The elegant composition, which brings the feminine bough of the plum tree together with the masculine pine branch as if they were two hands joining, flows toward the pine tree depicted on the north wall. And from the trunk of the pine tree, a crane peers out, exposing half of its body, while on the other side of the trunk, a crane painted in the Mokkei (Mu Xi) style cries out to the north. (Plate 6) The composition on the north wall ends here, more or less. The easternmost part of this wall and the east wall, which has an entry, were not painted.

The west end of the north wall, that is the left side of the pine tree when facing it, is where the artist signed and dated his work. In Chinese characters, the words “1883, painted by Yamamoto” are painted vertically, and a signature resembling a red-character seal is inscribed in red paint. (Plate 7)

To what extent Judith Gautier’s ideas are reflected in

Plate 5



The mural painted by Yamamoto Hosui on the west wall of the annex – plum tree covered with blossoms

Plate 4



Another mural painted by Yamamoto Hosui on the south wall of the annex – two pheasants sit on the curved part of the bough

the overall theme and composition and whether the concept itself was Hosui’s creation are questions yet to be answered. However, the pairing of “bamboo and sparrows,” “plum tree and warblers,” and “pine tree and cranes” epitomize the themes used in Oriental painting. Moreover, the work can be viewed as an expression of the four seasons, beginning with spring, depicted as a plum tree on the west wall, and bamboo as summer on the south wall. Fall is absent from the east wall, with its entryway, and the pine on the north wall represents winter.

The other distinctive feature of this work is the technique employed in painting it. Upon close inspection of the tree trunks and the signature, one discovers that the oil paint is diluted for thin, watercolor-like application and boldly applied. The work is almost entirely without outlines, and only the beaks of the pheasants, and the heads and beaks of the cranes are defined with outlines. The pine needles and bamboo leaves, as well as the wings of the cranes, are painted with bold unflinching strokes. In addition, the technique most often noted is that used for the plum blossoms and the moss depicted on the tree trunk. From a distance, the blossoms appear to be pink,

Plate 6

Photo: © Osamu Kumasegawa



The mural painted by Yamamoto Hosui on the north wall of the annex – the trunk of the pine tree and a pair of cranes

Plate 7

Photo: © Osamu Kumasegawa



Signature and date written by Yamamoto Hosui on the north wall of the annex

Plate 8



Another mural painted by Yamamoto Hosui on the north wall of the annex – the moss on the pine tree trunk (detail)

but approaching closer, one finds that they were painted with a brush that was dabbed separately in red and white paint, and the two colors were partially blended for the first time when the brush met the wall. The moss on the trunk was produced in the same manner. Green and white paints were dabbed on a brush first and blended only partially when the colors were applied to the wall. (Plate 8) The placement of strokes makes full use of the brush's movement using *matière*, as opposed to full strokes across the surface, and the effective building of texture and the three-dimensional appearance of the petals and moss are nothing short of brilliant. Through this technique, the luster of each color is maintained, and the brightness of the hues can be captured while retaining a subtle natural aspect.

This technique for oil painting is reminiscent of the grouping of colors used in Impressionist works. The impression one gets when viewing the plum blossoms at close range is extremely similar to that which is associated with the flowers painted by Auguste Renoir and Claude Monet's water lilies, both of the same period. Each seemingly random stroke of the brush unleashes a host of radiant shades that form a vivid expression of nature. In this respect, it can be said that the two painters and Hosui shared a similar style. However, unlike the Impressionist approach, which begins with theory and is then followed by practice, Hosui almost unwittingly realized the essence of the style, which probably shared many characteristics with traditional Oriental painting.

From the latter part of the 1870s to the mid 1880s, Hosui was in close proximity to Impressionist art and activities related to it in the Charpentier salon as well as through exhibitions of Renoir and Monet sponsored by an art magazine known as *La Vie Moderne*. And it is no

coincidence that, in addition to Judith Gautier and Robert de Montesquiou, the young noble archetype of the *Fin-de Siècle* movement, the Montmartrois poets, Félix Fénéon and the symbolist Jean Moréas, who were the movers and shakers of Paris at the end of the century, felt an attraction to Hosui's work, or perhaps Hosui himself, and were in contact with him.

The essence of *Japonisme* is not simply the borrowing of a main subject or the emulation of composition. It may have conceivably taken shape in Paris in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a new aesthetic that values the intrinsic beauty of life itself. At a time when art styles reserved exclusively for the privileged such as Academism and Classicism were in decline, Hosui brought with him tasty Japanese cuisine (Hosui was adept in the kitchen and was also renowned in Paris as a swank figure

serving sophisticated Japanese cuisine to both the Japanese and French), an ethos void of preoccupation with principles and opinions, and above all, a liberated spirit that allowed him to paint what he wanted as he wanted. And it can be said with certainty that during his stay in France, in the course of his exchanges with the artists and elite of his time, Hosui served the purpose of resurrecting that which had been forgotten by the modern Western ways. One might say that Hosui was able to resurrect "art as an expression of the joy of life" and "art inspired by human behavior," which were lost in 19<sup>th</sup> century Western society as a result of the bloated scientific positivism and historicism that was prevalent at the start of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the Bourgeoisie. The amalgamation of art in Europe at the end of the century had completely decomposed and dissolved to the extent that it had to be renamed entirely. Western art was confined by the categorization of and limitations imposed on techniques and subjects. Rather than simply dreaming about a far away time and place in an attempt to forget the deterioration at home, Western art was looking for a truly human spirit which could provide and practice the new aesthetics. This was an effort to force itself to make meaningful advances. A clear understanding of the influence on Western culture created by Hosui during his stay in France might serve conversely as a hint elucidating what exactly Japan has thus far been learning from Europe. **US**

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