

Floral Japonisme

Late Nineteenth-Century European Gardening and Impressionist Painters

By *Okabe Masayuki*

The American painter John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), who had taken up residence in London in May 1885, decided to spend the summer of that year enjoying boating on the Thames River. He settled on traveling down the river about 100 km from Oxford to Windsor. Traveling alone by boat could be dangerous and it would be safer to go with someone else, and he found just the right partner. In London, Sargent met a young American painter of about his own age. Edwin Austin Abbey was a painter and illustrator from Philadelphia who had just arrived in England. Both were in their late twenties and single. It was their first long residence in England, and stress had accumulated from being closed up painting portraits and drawing illustrations in their ateliers in the old city of London.

They set out down the river, and just as they were approaching Pangborne it happened. The boat suddenly began to rock, and Sargent was thrown into the water. It was a careless mistake, unusual for one who was so tall, muscular and robust. Although his life was saved, he suffered a serious injury when his head struck a spike.

That year, Sargent had found himself at a crossroads. Prior to moving to London, he had inhabited the painting circles of Paris. Born of expatriate American parents in Florence, the art capital of Italy, he had followed his parents here and there to the health resorts of Italy, Switzerland and southern France. He had undergone no formal schooling, but had received private tutoring to cultivate his special talents. From birth, he had been nurtured in classical art and culture, and raised to become an artist. He was born in the latter half of the 19th century, when America was only several decades past gaining independence from colonial status. Setting aside the economy,



Plate 1: John Singer Sargent, "Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose", 1885 - 1886, Oil on canvas, Tate Gallery, London

America could only be seen as following and imitating the culture of Europe. As a result, large numbers of cultured individuals and artists wanted to live in Europe. Sargent's life and art were born of just this American yearning for Europe. It was perhaps only natural that he sought Paris, at that time the center of European arts, as a place to complete his training as an artist and make a living as a painter. Sargent spent the greater portion of his youth,

from the age of 17 through his twenties, in Paris.

However, his portrait "Madame X," which was exhibited in a Paris salon in May 1884 was to change the course of his life. The full-length profile of one of the most elegant and fashion-conscious beauties of Parisian society brought on a scandal. Her white skin flushed the color of lavender, the extremely lowcut black evening gown boldly revealing her chest, together



Plate 2: John Singer Sargent, "Garden Study of the Vickers Children", 1884,
Oil on canvas,
Flint Institute of Art, Flint, Michigan

with the daring formative style and use of color drew inquisitive stares. This popular painter met unforeseen social disfavor and the reaction of the model, who was snobbish by nature anyway, turned increasingly colder, and eventually, a lawsuit was filed demanding the handing over of the portrait. Furthermore, his relationship with Judith Gautier, an influential figure in the art world of the Parisian salons who had stood behind him, began to sour. Exactly a year later he left Paris and set

up residence in London.

In order to allow Sargent to spend the rest of the summer convalescing from the serious injury he had sustained during his boat adventures, his friend Abbey rented a house in the village of Broadway, along the banks of the River Avon, a tributary of the Thames. As chance would have it, there were a number of American painters living in this lush, pastoral region of southern England. The companionship of that summer in the countryside not only

helped to heal his physical wound, but also soothed him mentally after having momentarily lost his way.

He found greatest serenity while visiting the home of Francis Davis Millet, who was then establishing himself as a portrait painter. He found being with Millet and his wife and children extremely congenial. He relaxed during the daytime, and as the day drew to a close, it was time to prepare dinner. The two young daughters went out into the garden as dusk gathered. Shortly, small lights began to shine in the grass of the garden. Surprised, Sargent went out into the garden, and there found the little girls had lit candles inside paper lanterns. While the green of the garden grew darker as the light grew dimmer, the reddish light of the paper lanterns in contrast gradually grew brighter. Between the flowers blooming in all their glory, the two girls in their pretty white dresses emerged from the dimness. It was a beautiful, dreamlike scene. For several days thereafter Sargent continued painting at the same time of day, attempting to capture that vision in a painting. The painting that resulted, in which he substituted two slightly older daughters of another painter, was given the title "Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose." (Plate 1)

It was a new experiment for Sargent. To create a work not inside the atelier, but outside surrounded by nature. The blossoms and stems swayed to and fro in the gentle summer breeze and the flickering light of the paper lanterns changed the intensity of the lighting at dusk.

The main flowers of "Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose" are lilies. Since the modern era, the lily has been a common motif in Western painting. Especially in portrayals of the Annunciation, it is often used as symbolic of the immaculate conception of the son of God by the Virgin Mary. However, the lilies used in such portraits are different from the ones in Sargent's painting. To be more accurate, they are of a different species. The lilies that appear with the Virgin Mary are slightly smaller madonna lilies, which grow in the Mediterranean



Plate 3 (top) : Claude Monet, "Red Lilies", 1883, (D.Wildenstein, Catalogue Raisonné)



Plate 4 (right) : Claude Monet, "Japanese Lilies", 1883, (D.Wildenstein, Catalogue Raisonné)

coastal area of southern France. Those that appear in Sargent's painting are white trumpet lilies, originally from Japan, and they have large flowers that bloom laterally. Another of Sargent's paintings of lilies and children from about the same period, "Garden Study of the Vickers Children," (Plate 2) portrays this same type of lily.

At that time in America and Europe, the demand for lilies in gardening and for cut flowers was greater than the supply. The reason for this was that in France under the Third Republic, beginning in the 1870s, and Great Britain during the latter part of the

Victorian era, along with economic prosperity, the lifestyle of ordinary people became materially richer and more beautifully decorated. Ornamentation

began with architecture, and furniture, wallpaper, lighting and flowers became essential commodities. It was about this time that lilies became indispensable for decorating private homes at Christmas and Easter. The lilies of Japan, which had just emerged from seclusion at the time of the Meiji Restoration, attracted attention. Japan is rich in lilies. Of all the flowers, it was easy to export lilies because they could be transported as bulbs. The Japanese government, which formally participated in the Vienna Exposition of 1871, actively introduced Japanese plants, tea and silkworm culture as export items. It was in this way that demand and supply were linked together. The bulbs of such Japanese lilies as white trumpet lilies, gold-banded lilies and *Lilium brownii* traveled halfway around the

globe to the corners of towns around Europe and America. The export of lilies continued for over half a century, and at its peak prior to World War II, exports of white trumpet lily bulbs amounted to over 40,000,000 per year.

In 1885, the year in which Sargent painted these lilies, Japanese lilies were on the European market and just beginning to achieve popularity. It is appropriate that it was Japanese white trumpet lilies which acted in concert with the little girls' white dresses. And the paper lanterns with unique round forms which created the light were also a Japanese product, a collapsible lantern

known as "Odawara Chochin." The vision captured by Sargent which showed the swaying of the blossoms and soft light was actually touched off by the culture of Japan, a result of elegant Japanese gardening, the cultivation of plants, and the play of light. These two or three years, in which he came in closest contact with Japan, is said to be the period when he was closest to the Impressionists. The Impressionist way of understanding beauty was to become intimate with the beauty that was in nature. At a time when he had faltered along his life course, had he not been enchanted by the innocent Japanese, not mature European beauty of the little girls and the flowers?

Sargent was close to the great Impressionist painter Claude Monet (1840-1926), and his famous portrait of Monet painting in the field was completed the following year. In 1882 Monet moved to Giverny, where he was to remain to the end of his days. There he gathered Japanese flowers in large numbers, including lilies, chrysanthemums, cherry trees, peach trees, irises and water lilies and worked hard at landscape gardening. This was the period in which he began giving flowers to his friends, and it was exactly the period in which flower exports from Japan were increasing at a rapid pace. His "Red Lilies" (Plate 3) and "Japanese Lilies" (Plate 4) were completed in 1883. Both Monet and Sargent were absorbed in Japanese flowers during these years.

Painting establishes and records the trends and way of life of a period, as well as that period's aesthetic sense. In the background of a painting of lilies, we can see that the development of landscape gardening stimulated by Japanese gardening and cultivation of flowers and the development of aestheticism in response to the beauty of flowers preceded the paintings. **LUJI**

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