

Realism Vs. Decorative Arts: Painters Who Saw Utopia in the Nature and Art of Nikko

By *Okabe Masayuki*

Who could possibly have imagined that the young man would become a great painter. At the age of 22, Kosugi Kunitaro (1881-1964) and his teacher Ioki Bunsai (1863-1906), met with the great Russian painter well-known throughout the world, Vasilij Vasilévich Vereshchagin (1843-1904). As the Japanese saying goes, “You cannot say *kekko* (splendid) until you have seen Nikko,” and upon the recommendation of Minister Rosen of the Russian legation in Tokyo, Vereshchagin went to sojourn in Nikko.

In reality, during the Meiji era Nikko was quite provincial. Among the foreigners who visited Japan, it was a popular sightseeing destination and it developed into a resort for visitors from overseas, but in comparison with Tokyo where *bunmei kaika*, “civilization and enlightenment,” that is, Westernization and modernization, was proceeding apace, Nikko was in no way a place that emanated culture. For example, if one wanted to study Western art, there was no adequate opportunity to do so. Kosugi Kunitaro became a disciple of the Western-style painter Ioki Bunsai who happened to move to Nikko, but this intensely curious young man had great interest in how other artists painted. It was at that time that Vereshchagin happened to stay at Nikko. Through the mediation of a local art merchant, this great Russian painter and the best of the local painters encountered one another. For Kosugi, to be present when his own teacher met this great painter from the West was an exceptional opportunity.

Actually, Kosugi had sometimes gone to Tokyo to study painting, keeping this secret from his teacher. At the age of 17 he had studied briefly at the Hakubakai (White Horse Society) before returning to his home in Nikko, at 19 had studied at the Fudoshu art academy, and at the age of 21 had



Plate 1: Ioki Bunsai, “Nikko Toshogu (Toshogu Shrine, Nikko),” 1890s, watercolor on paper

become a member of the Taihei-yogakai, an organization of Western-style painters. During those years, he received stimulation from various older painters and colleagues and continued his research. Born into a samurai family of the Mito domain, Ioki Bunsai was imbued with the spirit of the warrior, and as a result, believed that one could only have one teacher throughout one’s life. Ioki therefore felt that by going off and cultivating relationships with various others, Kosugi was betraying his teacher.

It was at this time that Kosugi took as his artist’s name “Misei,” meaning “not yet awakened” or “not yet enlightened.” There still remained about the 22-year-old traces of youth, but he was taking his first step in painting circles. Hence he took as his pseudonym “unenlightened.” While the youthful painter possessed great spirit, he was a believer in perfection, and hence he was a representative romanticist of the

Meiji era burning with idealism and love of learning.

In contrast, his teacher Ioki Bunsai after taking up residence in Nikko was convinced of his own aesthetics and appointed task. Born at the end of the Tokugawa shogunate and educated in the early years of the Meiji period, Ioki’s training in Western painting has been incomplete. However, the modern nation of Japan required Western-style painting. At the beginning of the Meiji period, the techniques of Western-style painting were practical. They were employed in drawing maps, illustrating textbooks and teaching materials, illustrating newspapers and magazines, decorating the interior of buildings, recording public works, and painting portraits of important personages. Commencing in 1884 Ioki Bunsai worked for six years in the Forestry Bureau of the Agriculture and Commerce Ministry where his work consisted of drawing specimens of

plants. On the side, he studied in the painting academy of Takahashi Yuichi, a pioneer of modern Japanese painting in the Western style. Deciding that he could make a living by painting portraits, he quit and set forth travelling throughout the country, eventually ending up in Nikko.

His painting of the elaborately carved and decorated gate Yomeimon of the Toshogu Shrine at Nikko was exhibited at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in America and received high praise there. Due to domestic feuding within Japan, very few Western-style paintings were sent to the exposition, yet within these unfavorable circumstances, the scientific, objective, highly detailed realist portrayal and the oriental theme of Ioki Bunsai's work impressed Westerners.

Seizing upon this appraisal to discover his own theme, Ioki left the painting circles of Tokyo and decided to take up permanent residence in Nikko, mainly painting various aspects of the Nikko Toshogu Shrine for the overseas market. (Plate 1) In addition, he cultivated and researched alpine plants in the rock garden he created around his residence, making large numbers of paintings of these plants. He developed relationships with such prominent alpine botany researchers as Makino Tomitaro and Takeda Kyukichi. While his depictions of plants were extolled for their beauty, at the same time they were greatly admired by scientists for their dedicated realism. In other words, the decorative art of the early 17th century Yomeimon of Nikko Toshogu, which because of its magnificent design and coloring was referred to as "Japanese Baroque," shone resplendently in the detailed realism of Ioki Bunsai. "Photographic realism" and "decorative art" at a glance seem at odds. But by depicting architecture which had pushed the limits of decorativeness and devoting every attention to the details of trees and plants, his art successfully amalgamates the contrasts. To the degree that he is a realist, he is enraptured by the delicate decorative art. He must have thought that within Japan, separated from Tokyo and high up in the mountains, Nikko was a utopia, a



Plate 2: V. V. Vereshchagin, "Shinto Temple in Nikko," 1903, Oil on canvas, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

mystical realm of religious sanctity where nature and art were unified.

Vereshchagin was enchanted by Nikko for the same reason. The majority of his more than six months' sojourn in Japan was spent painting in Nikko. One can imagine that because he arrived in the country during August, he may have been advised to travel to Nikko, a resort area for escaping the intense heat of Tokyo. In summer, Tokyo was also occasionally visited by epidemics, and because there were a large number of foreigners residing at Nikko, one of the few resort areas in the whole country, it may well have been suggested to the 60-year-old Vereshchagin upon his arrival that Nikko would be a congenial place. However, more than this, the suggestion may have been due to the fact that he was recognized as a great realist painter. By accurate depiction more minute than a photograph, he painted dramatic, intense spectacles. His art and aesthetics were well suited to the mystical nature of Nikko and the grandiose architecture of Toshogu. Within his aesthetic sensibility and thought, "Japan" meant "Nikko." As a matter of course, he painted the Yomeimon gate of Toshogu. (Plate 2)

Russia and Japan are neighboring states. From the 18th into the 19th century, Russian advanced gradually east-

ward across Eurasia, finally encountering Japan. The ultimate terminal of this progress was the port of Vladivostok which opens on the Japan Sea. From Vladivostok, the closest port in Japan is Tsuruga, less than a day's sail away. With the opening of the Siberian railroad, it became possible to travel east by land from St. Petersburg to Vladivostok, and in a mere day go from the West to the mysterious land of Japan in the Far East. A graduate of the naval academy, Vereshchagin had become interested in distant lands early on in life. More than thirty years earlier, he had planned a journey to Japan, but it took thirty years to actualize that one-day journey by ship.

During his youth, in the 1870s, Vereshchagin studied not in the East, but in Paris. He studied under Jean-Léon Gérôme, a representative historical painter of the main branch of Academism who was well-known as an orientalist who painted the customs of such foreign lands as those of the Middle East. He was unparalleled in his execution of subjects, leaving no trace of a brushstroke, for his powerful portrayal of nature and sentiment as if one were looking at the climax of a movie, and for the boldness of his composition. Vereshchagin learned well his teacher's style and techniques, visit-

ed the Holy Land and the Middle East where his teacher had never actually visited—and even made his way to India and China, painting dramatic scenes with the intricately detailed photographic force of his master. (Plate 3) He followed the army in Russia's wars in Central Asia and his "war paintings" portraying with verisimilitude the actual conditions of the battlefield were admired around the world, earning him a reputation as a painter of war. However, portraying the actual battlefield also means portraying the cruelty of war, and the Russian government even banned the domestic public exhibition of his works. He became the first anti-war painter.

It was natural for Vereshchagin who was absorbed in the arabesque designs and decorative art of Islam and India to encounter and admire Japanese art, a treasure house of decorative arts, especially the architecture of Nikko. And it must have been his destiny in perfecting his art to reach Japan late in his life.

While he was in Japan, Vereshchagin submitted a series of articles to a newspaper in his own country, and in this



Plate 3: V. V. Vereshchagin, "The Doors of Tamerlane's Mausoleum," 1872-73, oil on canvas, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

series he wrote earnestly about the beauty of nature in Japan, the propriety and peace-loving nature of its people, the maturity of its culture, and the high level of art and aesthetics. Due to the proximity of Russia and Japan, there was in both nations a palpable tension just prior to the outbreak of hostilities between the two countries. When war finally broke out, he wrote in a letter to his wife, "I truly regret this." However, as a true patriot conscious of his own social duties, he immediately returned to St. Petersburg, and turned right around and headed for the east following the army. On board the flagship of the Russian fleet blockading the harbor of Port Arthur (Ryojun; Lushun) when it was shelled by the Japanese army, he died when the ship went down. This death was reported by journalists around the world, including those of the opposing nation Japan, and his loss was lamented everywhere. The works that he painted in Japan (Plate 4) and the majority of the more than 300 artistic craftworks (decorative artworks) and other products he gathered in Japan are now in the collection of the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg.

In 1903, on the eve of the Russo-Japanese War, two great painters who loved travelling and the natural features of the land, who loved nature and realism, as well as the decorative arts, encountered one another on the sacred ground of Nikko. They were each moved as a result of their respective training and personal character. That was enough. They did not discuss as painters such topics as details of technique. It was only the disciple Kosugi who was left unsatisfied.

Vereshchagin stayed in the residence of the forest warden, near the cinnabar-painted bridge, *Shinkyō*, symbolic of Nikko and near the Kanaya Hotel where visitors from overseas stayed. The residence was at the edge of town near Toshogu. Kosugi made up his mind to negotiate with the master of the residence to let him have a look at Vereshchagin's studio while the



Plate 4: V. V. Vereshchagin, "Japanese Beggar," 1903, Oil on canvas, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

painter was out. By one means or another, he wanted to understand the secret of Vereshchagin's art. But that was impossible. Vereshchagin returned to Russia.

Kosugi later took the artist's name "Hoan" and he went on to become a representative painter of Japan. Initially he adopted the same highly detailed realism as the two great painters he encountered at Nikko, but after studying in Europe, he adopted both Eastern materials and Eastern themes in creating his own unique style. He too followed the army in the Russo-Japanese War, and composed a passionate lament upon hearing of the death of Vereshchagin. **JTI**

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