

East-West Cultural Exchange in Art

– France and the Orient in the 1880's – (Part 6)

By Takashina Erika

The European End-of-Century Aesthetic and Japan

Japanese painter Yamamoto Hosui's stay in Paris over the nine and a half years following the Paris Expo in 1878 was instrumental in spurring on a mounting interest in the Orient and Japanese art that had begun mainly through the Expo, private art collections and publications on the topic. Gaining the favor of Judith Gautier, the daughter of poet Théophile Gautier, Hosui painted a mural in her villa in the summer of 1883. In addition, his solo exhibition in 1885, evidently on Judith's recommendation and advice, and the publication of *Poèmes de la Libellule* (Poems of the Dragonfly), as has been detailed, created no small sensation among lovers of Japanese art in Paris.

This deluxe collection of poems was printed by Gillot, the leading company in multicolor printing at the time. Hosui also painted the illustration for the 1885 calendar that was added as a year-end supplement to the Dec. 1, 1884 issue of *Paris Illustré*, an illustrated magazine also printed by Gillot. (Plate 1) The large 37cm by 25cm print portrays a scene with two *kimono*-clad women at its center, with monthly calendars printed on rectangular

strips of paper of the type traditionally used for writing *tanka* poem that are tied with red string to the branch of a cherry tree in full bloom. A woman sitting on the ground dressed in a greenish-brown kimono tied with a blue *obi* (sash) holds a writing brush in her right hand. In the foreground is a box containing an inkstone and a brush, and to the side of a woman are piled more strips of the white paper. Clad in a blue kimono tied with a red and yellow obi, a second woman is standing as she ties a strip of paper to a tree branch. On the ground is spread a red woolen blanket, just one of several of the color print's beautiful accents, which also include the red of the kimono lining collar, the trim of the under-layer kimono and the obi clasp. Featuring a strip of paper for each day printed with Christian holidays and saint's days, this single-page calendar spans an entire year.

Lahure, the company that published *Paris Illustré*, also published a thin booklet, totaling less than 20 pages, titled *La Mort du Samurái* (Death of the Samurai) in March 1885. The book's cover and title page read "*La Mort du Samurái* par F. Sénaté, avec une aquarelle du peintre japonais YAMAMOTO" (Death of the Samurai, written by F. Sénaté, with a watercolor by the Japanese

Plate 1

Photo: Bibliothèque Nationale



Yamamoto Hosui, "Étrennes 1885," in *Paris Illustré* (Dec. 1, 1884), 37cm x 25cm

Plate 2

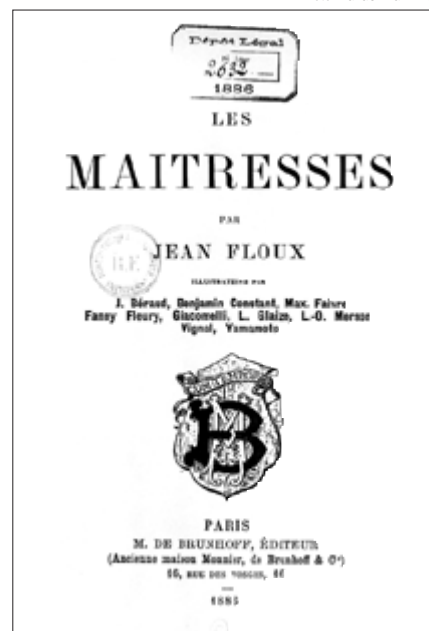
Photo: Bibliothèque Nationale



Yamamoto Hosui's illustration on the title page of F. Sénaté, *La Mort du Samurái*, Paris, 1885

Plate 3

Photo: Takashina Erika



The cover of Jean Floux's *Les Maîtresses*, 1886

painter Yamamoto). To this day we know nothing about the author Sédaté, which is in all probability a nom de plume, and although a Frenchman pens this tale of an aged samurai who, despondent at the Westernization of Japan, eventually ends his life in a dramatic *hara-kiri* ritual, the story was likely inspired by a Japanese tale. Appended to the end of the book is a list of Japanese terms that defines such words as *sakura* (cherry blossom), *Fujisan* (Mt. Fuji), *biwa* (the Japanese lute), *Heike* (the Taira family which prospered in the 12th century), sake and *fudo* (a buddhist guardian deity), among others. A particularly striking aspect of the tale is that the author conjures up Saigo Takamori (a conservative warrior and statesman from Satsuma [now Kagoshima Prefecture] of the 17th century) as the protagonist listens to a song about Heike played on the biwa. Convinced that opening Japan to the outside world is a mistake, the old samurai identifies with Saigo, and it is here that the music of Heike biwa, so reminiscent of the Satsuma-biwa music, is performed as a song of loss. The idea that the Japanese tradition was being destroyed at the hands of the West and opposition to the Westernization of Japan were prominent topics among certain European lovers of Japanese art at that time.

Based on a Hosui watercolor, the illustration on the title page of *La Mort du Samuraï* depicts the ocean at night, crested in violent white waves and lit by a full

moon just as it rises over the horizon. (Plate 2) Behind the waves on the left side of the painting appear hordes of skeletons clad in body armor and armed with swords and arrows. The figure at the top of the frame, the lone human figure in the painting, a general holding a fauchard and peering out over the distance of the ocean, appears to be leading his troops into battle. A fleet of ships silhouetted in black is discernible across the distance of the ocean, and is perhaps intended to represent the threat to Japanese peace and stability posed by the West. *Heike Monogatari* (The Tale of the Heike) is evoked to symbolize the protagonist's regrets as he laments the passage of better days gone by, and is rendered powerless to do more than grieve that which had become a phantom of the past upon the arrival of the U.S. black ships. This idea, conceivably the tale's overarching theme, is portrayed on the title page in a tragic painting offset by the skeletons and other touches of Housi-esque humor.

The period from 1885 through 1886 was arguably the most dynamic period Hosui spent in Paris. His frontispiece for *Paris Illustré*, the title page print of *La Mort du Samuraï*, his solo exhibition, and his illustrations for *Poèmes de la Libellule* were followed by the publication by Brunhoff of *Les Maîtresses* (The Mistresses), a collection of Jean Floux poems, in May 1886. (Plate 3) Hosui was the only Japanese painter among the nine artists who drew the illustrations that accompany this collection of poetry. The illustrations are accompanied by poems dedicated to the illustrators. The caption under the title of the poem dedicated to Hosui reads "à Yamamoto" (to Yamamoto). This poem, *Le Ver Luisant* (Firefly), describes a firefly who, prosaic by day, goes unnoticed and overlooked, but to the surprise of the other insects glows resplendently when day turns to night. (Plates 4 and 5) The Hosui illustration is a literal translation of the Floux poem, depicting a firefly captivating a gathering of insects – spiders, butterflies, ants, cicadas and crickets – as it glitters in a night thicket. (Plate 6) Hosui created a fantastic miniature universe punctuated by touches of the photorealism of the Shijo school. Hosui chose not to explicitly draw the firefly, but rather imply its presence by means of its ethereal light, and conjure up a floating party of insects drawn in silhouette.

Floux left behind no work other than this collection of poetry, and we know little about the poet as a man, though he is said to have been typically Parisian in temperament and a member of Le Chat Noir, the most spirited gathering of artists at the time. As is well-

Plate 4

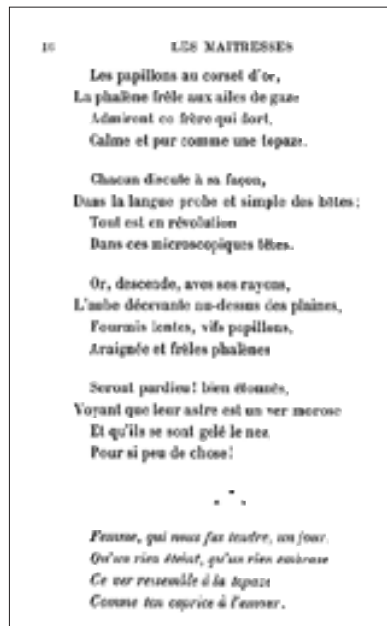
Photo: Takashina Erika



The first verses of Jean Floux's poem "Le Ver Luisant" dedicated to Yamamoto Hosui in *Les Maîtresses*, 1886

Plate 5

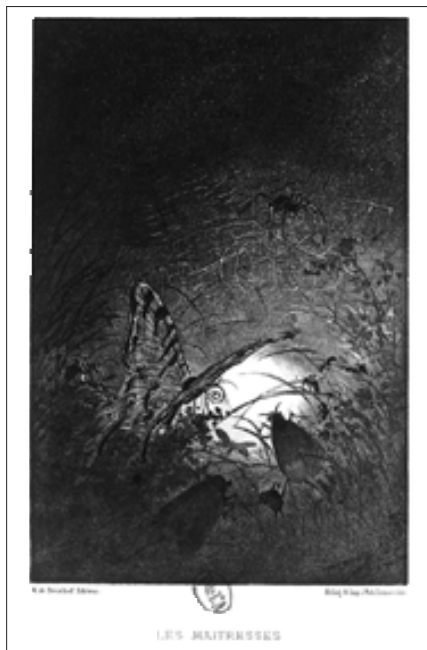
Photo: Takashina Erika



The latter part of Jean Floux's poem "Le Ver Luisant" dedicated to Yamamoto Hosui in *Les Maîtresses*, 1886

Plate 6

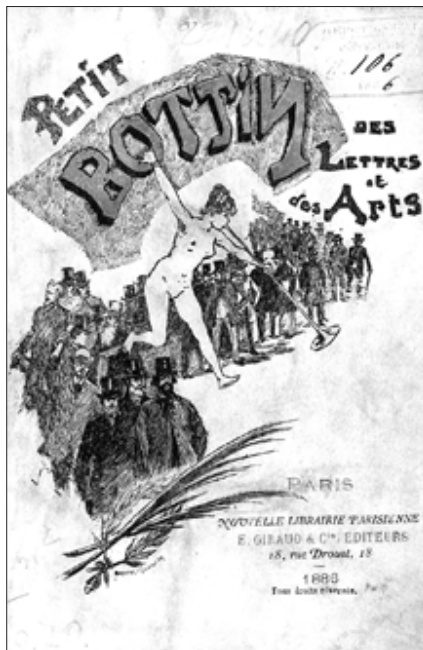
Photo: Bibliothèque Nationale



The Hosui illustration for Jean Floux's poem "Le Ver Luisant" in *Les Maîtresses*, 1886

Plate 7

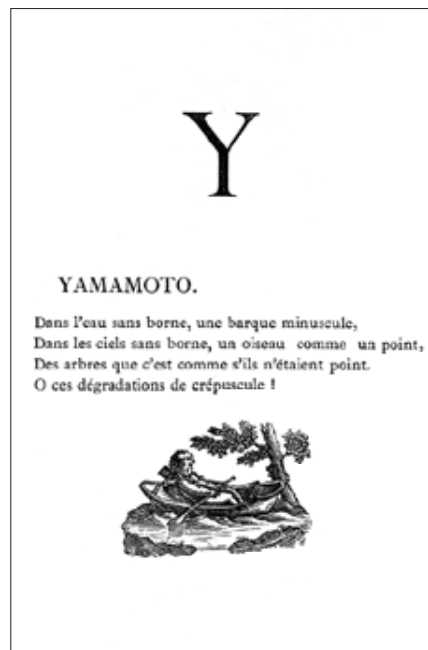
Photo: Takashina Erika



The cover of *Petit Bottin des Lettres et des Arts*, June, 1886

Plate 8

Photo: Takashina Erika



Four lines of symbolist poetry accompanying Hosui's name in *Petit Bottin des Lettres et des Arts*, June, 1886

known, this group took its name from the Montmartre cabaret, the establishment where the artists most often gathered, and in 1881 published a magazine by the same name as well, a journal that came to be known for its numerous covers drawn by Théophile Steinlen. One featured attraction at Le Chat Noir gatherings were the shadow plays, and Hosui's illustrations may also have been informed by this diversion that was so popular at the time. The artists who regularly frequented the cabaret did not participate in the card games or billiards other patrons enjoyed, devoting themselves instead exclusively to the amusement of conversation, raucous debate and poetry readings. As most of the poems in the Flux collection were accompanied by dedications, it was thought his first published work would be a poetry collection, which had already been recited before the Le Chat Noir artists. In addition to the nine illustrators, other eminent artists who dedicated Flux poems included the painter Jean-Léon Gérôme, Hosui's teacher in Paris; Catulle Mendès, a popular poet of the day, and for a time the husband of Judith Gautier; and Emmanuelle Tronquois, a man renowned for his knowledge of Oriental cultures who later served as an interpreter and secretary at the French Embassy in Japan, and an acquaintance of Kuroda Seiki and Okakura Tenshin. This collection of poetry provides valuable source material that demonstrates the relationships among the artists, poets and men of culture assembled in

Montmartre at the time.

Another document offering valuable insight into the interaction of this circle is a slender tome published in June 1886 titled *Petit Bottin des Lettres et des Arts* (Small Yearbook of Men of Letters and Arts). (Plate 7) This account provides an alphabetical listing of approximately 280 entries, highlighting and briefly describing the literary men, artists and men of culture of the day. Skimming the list of painters, we find such names as Monet, Degas, Renoir, Seurat, Moreau, Sargent and Whistler; entries for poets and authors include Mallarmé, Verlaine, Baudelaire, Daudet, the father and son Dumas, Dostoevskii, Flaubert and Zola; and other renowned figures such as Rodin, Wagner, Lesseps and Sarah Bernhardt round out the journal. The proximate descriptions can ring with stinging sarcasm, as in this comment on Moreau, "Sharing the first name of Gustave with Flaubert, Moreau also takes up the same theme as Flaubert – the sacred ritual of Herodias." Anatole France's work is also critiqued as follows, "Though subtle, a poem this noble was perhaps written tongue-in-cheek," and Maupassant is summed up in just two letters, N.C., which stand for *notoire commerçant* (notoriously commercial). We find only a single entry for an artist from the Orient, and of course only one Japanese, included in this list of personages, and that is Hosui. The lone Y entry, Hosui's name is accompanied by the following four lines of symbolist poetry: (Plate 8)



Hosui's illustration for the cover of Robert de Montesquiou's *Les Chauves-Souris*, 1893, 11.9cm x 13.2cm

*Dans l'eau sans borne, une barque minuscule,
Dans les ciels sans borne, un oiseau comme un point,
Des arbres que c'est comme s'ils n'étaient point.
O ces dégradations de crépuscule!*

(A single tiny, tiny ship along the endless stream of water / A single bird small as a dot along the endless expanse of sky / The trees like nothing at all / Oh, this twilight loses its color little by little!)

Its stinging sarcasm suggests that this book was published under anonymity, although recent research indicates that it was in fact almost certainly penned by Félix Fénéon, Jean Moréas, Paul Adam and Oscar Méténier. This type of calculated intellectual amusement was particularly fashionable among the people of the school of symbolist art. Armed with the brush, a weapon mightier than the pen, Hosui was capable of displaying his own spirit of playfulness among these French artists, as he did in the print on *Poèmes de la Libellule* cover. Characteristically carefree and harmless, Hosui evidently also enjoyed the give and take with other artists in sophisticated “play for play’s sake.”

The year 1886 was clearly a crucial year for art in France. It was in this year that the group exhibitions by the Impressionists came to an end and, guided primarily by Fénéon, the post-Impressionist period started. The same year also saw Gauguin move to Pont-Aven, the birth of the Nabis school, and Moréas’ decree of the symbolist aesthetic. It was against this background of shifting sands that Hosui was a prominent figure among the artists spearheading a new age in art, a full participant in his own right in the artistic scene of the day.

During this period, Western European artists recognized in Japanese art the liberal use of tiny creatures like insects and reptiles, which had to this point been relegated to a lowly rank inferior to human beings in Western art, as an interesting decorative motif. *Les Chauves-Souris* (Bats), the title of a collection of poems published in 1893 by Robert de Montesquiou, a figure

who typifies the end-of-the-century aesthetic, evidently expresses this newfound sensibility. In a letter dated 1884, Count Montesquiou commissioned Hosui to illustrate this poetry collection, and the splendid original paintings he created for the illustrations using ink and gold remain in France today. (Plate 9)

In Japan, human emotion is identified both superficially and more profoundly with the beauties of the natural world, as demonstrated by the natural motifs that are a particularly powerful element in Japanese poetry. This sensibility has also long manifested itself in the visual expression of Japanese art. The artist in Japan does not view nature through the lens of the law of the jungle, or as a harsh and unforgiving ecosystem, but rather reveals a perspective on insects and grasses that occupy the same world and suffer the same shifting emotions as its human inhabitants. Arguably, the tradition of projecting insects and other tiny creatures on human emotions, as illustrated in *Chōju Giga* (Scrolls of Frolicking Animals) and *Chūgyō-cho* (Notebook of Insects and Fish) by the Japanese Watanabe Kazan, whose work is thought to conceal messages from painters concerned about Japan’s coastal defense line, is a uniquely Japanese device. Koizumi Yakumo (Lafcadio Hearn) posited that the integral role described in Japanese literature that insects play in the daily lives of Japanese people, an orientation so far developed as to have grown into its own aesthetic sensibility, encroaches on spiritual realms that remain closed to Westerners. Hearn even said, “Only Japanese and Greeks understand what the insects are saying.” (Hearn’s adoration of his Greek mother is widely known.) Showing affection for and falling in love with insects, the emotions evoked in the tale *Mushi Mezuru Hime* (The Princess who Loves Insects), are seldom evident in the Western tradition.

The European craze for Japanese art crescendoed at the end of the 19th century, as the solid foundation for the recreation of reality in Western art began to lose its footing. Japanese art served as a medium for Western artists looking to manifest in concrete form their own internal workings. Aesthetic sensibilities previously left unaddressed in mainstream modern Western art – the ephemeral, transient and ambiguous – were revived in France at the end of the century in the form of the firefly, the dragonfly and the bat. A pure aesthetic of “worship of the incomplete” is what Japonisme brought to Europe at the end of the 19th century. JS

(This is the last article in this series)

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