

Of Master and Pupil — the Beginning of Western Art in Japan

By Okabe Masayuki

On June 13th, 1880, a 25-year-old artist made his way to Yokohama from Tokyo. Goseda Yoshimatsu lived in the Shin'ogawa district of Kanda, part of the area in Tokyo known as *shitamachi* — low-lying areas of the capital where ordinary townfolk have always lived and prospered. He took the horse-drawn tram to Shimbashi from where Japan's first railroad had been laid to Yokohama. The line had been opened seven years earlier and the journey to Yokohama took about an hour. On that day at the beginning of the rainy season the weather had turned out fine.

The walk up to the Yamate district of Yokohama from the station was steep. Climbing the many steps to this particular part of the city was no easy task for Yoshimatsu, who was dressed like an English gentleman and he was soon puffing and blowing as he took the steps one at a time. But the breeze that greeted him was refreshing. Here high above the harbor he found himself in a different world. Between the low, rolling hills were expanses of lawn and elegant colonial-style two-story house, each with its own cluster of trees, and white painted bungalows punctuating the landscape. Bathed in glorious sunshine, there was a sense of spaciousness. It was some time since Yoshimatsu had been to Yokohama and he relished the scene as he made his way to 88 Yamate. He knocked and waited. The person who answered the door was a slightly stooped foreigner whom Yoshimatsu respectfully addressed as *sensei*.

Yoshimatsu was only ten years old



Plate 1: Goseda Yoshimatsu, "Jusansai no Jigazo" (self-portrait of 12-year-old), 1867, oil on canvas, 31.7 x 23.7cm, Museum of Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music

when he first met Charles Wirgman (1832-1891), an Englishman, who was living in this area of Yokohama that had been set aside for foreign nationals. That first meeting took place in 1865 when the Shogun still ruled and three years before the Meiji Emperor would be restored to the throne.

Yoshimatsu's father, Goseda Horyu, was also a painter. Although he worked in a traditional Japanese style, painting narrow silk wall hangings, he had pioneered what came to be called Yokohama-e, paintings combining Western techniques of modeling with light and shade, and perspective

drawing.

Yoshimatsu, who was Horyu's first son, was born in 1855 at the Edo (Tokyo) mansion of the Kurume clan. Recognizing some talent in his son and convinced that Western-style painting would predominate in the future, Horyu decided that Yoshimatsu should learn at first-hand the techniques and art of Western painting from an accomplished exponent. Having heard something of this English painter's reputation, Horyu asked Wirgman to become Yoshimatsu's teacher. In actual fact, because Japan was still very much isolated from the rest of the world at the time, Horyu sending his son to this "foreign enclave" to study was almost the same as sending him abroad.

Wirgman was born in London and studied painting in Paris. Following a spell of military service, he took up the post of special correspondent and artist for the *Illustrated London News* in China in 1857, and covered the second Opium War there.

He then traveled to Japan with the British diplomat, Mr. Alcock, arriving on April 25th, 1861. Having once more opened her doors to the world in 1859 in response to pressure from a number of countries, the political scene in Japan was in turmoil. A number of important events were taking place in Japan and it was the current stage of international politics. It had always been Wirgman's job to be where things were happening and Japan became his next assignment. In addition to sending reports and illustrations back to London from his base in the foreign quarter of Yokohama, he started publishing



Plate 2: Charles Wirgman, "Pagoda", watercolor on paper, 16.5 x 21.5cm, British Museum

Japan Punch. This satirical biased magazine drew on such things as events within the foreign community in Yokohama, the international scene as a whole, and the life and culture of Japan in general. Besides this, he also painted a number of landscapes and scenes of life in Japan. He subsequently married a Japanese woman who bore him a son.

Wirgman had not been particularly interested in having a pupil. He soon recognized, however, that the ten-year-old Yoshimatsu had the makings of a very fine artist and therefore decided to give him some instruction. Something of the wisdom and extraordinary skill of this child prodigy can be seen in Yoshimatsu's self-portrait held by Tokyo University of Arts and Music, painted in oils when he was just twelve (Plate 1). Yoshimatsu thus became the first Japanese artist to learn Western-style painting techniques and Wirgman the first Western artist to take a Japanese as his pupil. In 1866, a year after Yoshimatsu came to him, Wirgman took on the 38-year-old *samurai*, Takahashi Yuichi. Then came Tamura Soryu from Kyoto. Subsequently both went on to lay the

foundations of a Western approach to painting in Tokyo and Kyoto respectively, thus enhancing the reputation of Wirgman as both as instructor and educator in Western art.

A number of watercolors by Charles Wirgman are now in the British Museum. They were bequeathed to the museum by Theodore Blake

Wirgman (1848-1925). Theodore was Charles' younger brother and a successful artist in his own right who, incidentally, was friendly with Van Gogh in Paris. Charles' work in the British Museum comprises some original satirical pieces done for *Japan Punch* as well as various sketches of China and Japan. One of them, entitled "Pagoda" (Plate 2), has exactly the same composition as a picture in the Kanagawa Prefectural History Museum in Yokohama. This work which is also entitled "Pagoda" (Plate 3) is, moreover, attributed to Goseda Yoshimatsu.

Neither of these two works can be positively dated. Judging by the quality of the drawing and nuances of their coloring, however, they bear the mark of each of these artists. Apart from the fact that Wirgman's picture has a branch painted in the foreground and Yoshimatsu's painting has a seal in the same place within the composition, they are almost identical. Even if by chance a master and a pupil that got along very well sat side by side and painted the same scene, the two drawings were too much alike that it was in any way unnatural.

The pagoda in question was within the grounds of Sensoji temple in



Plate 3: Goseda Yoshimatsu, "Gojunoto" (Five-storied pagoda), watercolor on paper, 16.6 x 25.9cm, Kanagawa Prefectural History Museum

Asakusa, Tokyo and is seen along with the gate known as Niomon. The pagoda that had been painted used to be on the east side, but it was subsequently destroyed during the war. The pagoda was rebuilt on the west side, and it still exists today. The pond in the pictures called Benten-ike no longer exists as it was filled in. The tree painted in the right of both pictures is that of the bell tower, which was rung along with the bell at Ueno's Kan'eiji temple telling the people of Edo the time of day. This tree still exists today.

Then as now, the temple of Sensoji is at the heart of Asakusa, one of Tokyo's most thriving districts. It was a favorite location for such photographers as Felix Beato and Moser who took pictures there around 1877. The reflection in Benten-ike made a particularly interesting photograph. It was also a useful compositional element for any painting. But we must now content ourselves with the paintings and photographs that remain of the scene.

We know that in 1874, Yoshimatsu cooperated with his father in opening a gallery for the display of work with Western leanings within the grounds of Sensoji, so the two paintings of the pagoda may have been done at that time. It is thought that there may have been a sketch from which both paintings were done but what is important is that the paintings of the pagoda confirm the connections between the master and his pupil.

When Yoshimatsu went to Yokohama, it had been sometime since he had seen his master to whom he owed so much. He had wanted to see Wirgman to tell him that he was going abroad to study, and perhaps it is just possible that he went to say good-bye. Quite unexpectedly, however, Wirgman told Yoshimatsu that he was going to England.

After the Meiji Restoration in 1868,



Plate 4: Goseda Yoshimatsu, "Ningyo no Kimono" (Doll's Dress), 1883, oil on canvas, 149.5 x 113.5cm, private collection

Yoshimatsu opened a painting school, while also doing some cartography. In 1875 when he was 20 years old, he taught drawing at the Army Officers Academy. He then studied for a time at art school and in 1877 he received a prize at the first domestic exhibition to promote industry. He was then chosen to be the official artist to accompany the Emperor Meiji on his tour of the Hokuriku and Tokai regions of Japan. Following this he completed portraits of the Emperor Komei and the Empress Dowager Shoken, and it was this and other things which, despite his youth, confirmed his position as the first exponent of Western art in Japan. Nevertheless, it was Yoshimatsu's desire to further his skills by studying in France and his father borrowed the funds to finance the trip from the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Yoshimatsu left Japan on July 9th,

1880, from Yokohama aboard a French steamship and arrived in Paris on August 26th. On November 12th, he received a letter from Wirgman, who was in England. He studied under the French academic, Léon Bonnat, and as early as April 1881, he had five watercolors accepted for Le Salon, France's officially sponsored exhibition. Later on he had oils accepted, too. Of all his work that was accepted for exhibition at Le Salon only one remains, "Ningyo no Kimono" (Plate 4), dating from 1883.

Yoshimatsu arrived back in Yokohama via the U.S. on June 14th, 1890, having studied abroad for ten years. He had used up all his funds and after his return his mental state deteriorated. He finally died at the age of 60 on September 4th, 1915, having achieved very little since his return. One reason for this was the degree to which things in the art world in Japan had changed during his long absence. In addition to this, Wirgman died in

Yokohama on February 8th, 1891, just six months after his favorite pupil had arrived back in the country. It is also said that in later life Wirgman suffered from psychological problems.

It would seem, therefore, that master and pupil, both of whom that had been responsible for laying the foundations of Western art in Japan, led very lonely existences toward the end of their lives. For Yoshimatsu, however, the glory was to have his work accepted for Le Salon and for his name to be recorded in the annals of history. JTI

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