

# **LECTURES ON JAPANESE ART WORK**

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Lectures on Japanese art Work by Ernest Hart

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**ERNEST HART**

**LECTURES ON  
JAPANESE  
ART WORK**



*W. J. W. Lums*  
SOCIETY FOR THE ENCOURAGEMENT  
OF  
ARTS, MANUFACTURES, AND COMMERCE.

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LECTURES  
OF  
JAPANESE ART WORK.

BY  
ERNEST HART.

DELIVERED BEFORE THE SOCIETY, MAY 4, 11, AND 18, 1886.

WITH A CATALOGUE OF THE OBJECTS EXHIBITED, AND  
AN INDEX OF JAPANESE ARTISTS, &c.

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## PREFACE.

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To this reprint of the Lectures and the Catalogue, I have added a list of the Japanese signatures on the pieces exhibited, together with some chronological and historical details. For the preparation of this I am greatly indebted to the research and courtesy of Mr. Hayashi, and for its revision in passing through the press, to the kindness of my accomplished friend, Mr. William Anderson. Such a list, including the signatures of the principal artists in metal work, and in wood and ivory carving, and in lac (as well as the chief potters, and the marks of the principal potteries, has long been needed), and will, I have reason to believe, be highly appreciated by collectors and students of Japanese art. I hope it will be found useful in promoting the discrimination of the work of the long series of eminent artists of Japan, and in clearing away some of the difficulties and confusion which had, until a recent date, obscured the study of the products of the ancient arts of Japan. I am under great obligation to Mr. Anderson for the readiness with which, notwithstanding so many calls upon his time, he has brought his learning and discrimination to my aid, and for the invariable kindness with which he has favoured me with his advice throughout the years which I have spent in studying and collecting the representative series of specimens of the ancient art work of Japan to which the following pages refer. Mr. Anderson was, I believe, the first European, certainly the first Englishman, who appraised at its just value the pictorial art of Japan, and made it the subject of patient study. The magnificent work which he has recently published and illustrated on its history is a contribution to art knowledge, the value of which cannot be too highly estimated. The list of signatures of artists to be found in his catalogue of the Japanese pictures in the British Museum dispenses me from the necessity of including in my Appendix the *facsimiles* of the signatures of Japanese painters.

ERNEST HART.

*See in file 492*  
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# JAPANESE ART WORK.

BY

ERNEST HART.

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LECTURE I.—DELIVERED MAY 4, 1886.

I have undertaken a difficult task, and its difficulties, instead of diminishing as I set myself to prepare for its accomplishment, have seemed to me to increase.\*

Hardly a quarter of a century has elapsed since Japan (sealed for three centuries and

\* The historic arts of Japan are so numerous in their kind, so varied in their development, and so complicated in their detail, that the attempt to give even an outline of them to an audience not previously impregnated with Asiatic lore, and not accustomed to place itself at the standpoint of Eastern art motives, might well occupy a course of many more than three lectures; and it would be easier to attempt such a prolonged course than to endeavour to condense even a superficial review of the subject within three lectures. I shall deal, therefore, only with a small part of the subject, and its treatment must necessarily be rapid. Happily for those who desire to pursue the subject in many of its aspects, we have already, in recent literature, a number of books of unusually high merit and interest, to which I can refer you. Among these are the sumptuous work of Audsley on the "Ornamental Arts of Japan;" the eloquent and beautifully illustrated book of M. Gonse on "L'Art Japonais;" the instructive, erudite, and highly artistic volume on "The Pictorial Arts of Japan," which our accomplished countryman—my colleague in the medical profession—Mr. Anderson, is now passing through the press; the earlier, but interesting and valuable books of Dresser, Reade, and of Jarves and Sir Rutherford Alcock—pioneer workers in this subject—the admirable studies by Mr. Cutler of Japanese design; and the faithful and charming reproductions of Japanese art motives by Mr. Dillon. These books have obtained a reputation due not less to the singular beauty of the products which they describe and illustrate than to their fascinating novelty, and the invincible attraction which the genius of the artists of "the country of the Rising Sun" have for Europeans, to whom they have opened a new world of art.

impenetrable to European travellers or collectors) came suddenly into the family of civilised nations, and disclosed to our wondering eyes the treasures it had for so many centuries jealously guarded. The sudden dissolution of the feudal system, and the complete abandonment of the laws by which it had isolated itself from the European family of nations, were followed by its eager adoption of European institutions and customs. It hospitably welcomed English travellers, professors, artisans, and *savants*, and it has only too readily assimilated European habits and tastes. The breaking up of its old institutions, and the lamentable abandonment of its own exquisite costumes, fashions, and decorations, have led to the dispersion of the art treasures once prized beyond all estimation. Hence the exportation to European countries, for the benefit of European collections, of artistic works which had accumulated for centuries, the possession of a few of which was once the joy and pride of prince, noble, and knight. The daimios, or feudal lords, and the samurai, their two-sworded retainers, are now, alas, no more, and have given up their ancient possessions. The treasures of the temples have been largely destroyed or dispersed, and many of them are now in our keeping. The embroideries, the bronzes, the treasured swords, with their exquisitely chased hilts, guards, and mounts; the lacquered inros (medicine case) which every daimio or samurai wore at his girdle; the rare chests, despatch boxes, and perfume boxes of lac; the hanging pictures by great masters—too precious for more than occasional exposure to the view of the select few; all these fell suddenly, through war, through poverty, through change of tradition and habit, into the hands of

merchants and dealers often ignorant of their value, and testing them rather by standards of inherent costliness and richness of material than of artistic merit. Thousands of rare and exquisite objects have been destroyed; bronzes of great antiquity and of unrivalled workmanship have been cast into the melting pot by tons, and weapons consecrated by centuries of tradition, and decorated with the works of the great masters of past time, have disappeared, and can no longer be traced. Happily, though tardily, the cultivated members of the Japanese nation have awakened to the irreparable loss which they have suffered, and at the present moment we hear with pleasure that much of what remains in Japan of their art treasures is being carefully gathered into museums. There they are catalogued, and preserved with the loving and tender care which a nation ought to show to its monuments of historic art. In Europe, the objects which came first into our possession in great numbers were imperfectly valued because they were imperfectly understood. There were few means of identification of the artists, or of comparison of old and new; of originals and copies; of good work and bad. The language in which the historic data exist is of enormous complexity, and learnt only by few at the cost of years of toil, and it may truly be said that until Mr. Ninagawa and Mr. Wakai, the most accomplished of Japanese experts and archaeologists, made known their careful researches, we had in Europe but few data with which to guide ourselves in comparing the work of successive centuries as it came into our hands. To Mr. Wakai, and his pupil, Mr. Hayashi, now resident in Paris, we are all under great obligations, and to the latter I am especially indebted.

In Paris, M. Gonse, M. Burty, M. Duret, and M. Bing have followed up Japanese art studies with much ardour and great artistic taste, and with the skill in discriminative criticism for which French lovers of art are remarkable. In this country Mr. Franks and Mr. Anderson have, more than any other persons, contributed to our growing recognition of the importance of studying and discriminating the various schools and successive changes in Japanese schools of art, and to them we owe it that the British Museum possesses, and is now displaying, treasures of the ceramic and pictorial art of Japan which will be increasingly valued, and which other countries may envy us. The collection at South Kensington has many treasures, but also much rubbish, and is very far from being complete or repre-

sentative. It is a great pity that so rare an opportunity is being missed, for shortly these treasures of the great masters of Japanese art will be unattainable. Meanwhile their acquisition may still be made with due knowledge, at a cost ridiculously out of comparison with the inherent and artistic value of the objects, not to speak of their vast and growing interest to the history of art.

I stand here a recent student of the historical succession and development of the schools of Japanese art, and it is because I have found great difficulty, which I have been at no small pains to overcome, in classifying and discriminating the objects which it has been one of the chief pleasures of my life during the last few years to collect, that I thought that it might be interesting to you to put before you some of that information which I have, under the practical pressure of difficulties in collection, been at pains to acquire. I have, in examining the Japanese art collections of England, been disconcerted to find how few facilities many amateurs seem to have had, and how relatively little attention they seem to have given to the discrimination of the works of great artists from the purely mercantile productions, more or less skilfully imitated, as articles of modern commerce. It is an exceedingly common thing to see in this country mere worthless commercial reproduction of great works shown with pride alongside the masterpieces of men of extraordinary skill, and what should be deathless fame. The Japanese, like all Asiatics, is a skilful imitator. He has yielded easily and rapidly to the mercantile instinct.

It is a sad characteristic of the English dealer to require the reproduction of any saleable article by scores or hundreds. It is the essence of the true work of art that it is a unique creation of the imagination and the executive invention of a master. This unfailing characteristic of true art work European mercantilism sets itself determinedly to abolish, and it has done so with only too much success in Japan. The markets are flooded; the shops are full, and collections abound with superficial servile copies and cheap lacquered imitations of the old masterpieces. It is against this tendency, debasing the artistic instincts of the Japanese, and ruinous to the worth of European collections, that I wish, by this outline sketch which I am about to present to you, to protest. It is our duty, as art lovers, to study the characteristics of the original work of the founders of Japanese art, to instruct ourselves

so as to prevent the possibility of, what is now an easy facility, being deceived by common vamped up and worthless imitations, having more than the surface brilliancy to the eye, but none of the actual qualities of substantial material slowly built up, of delicate finish, originality, and accomplished and refined *main d'œuvre*, which a study of Japanese historic originals will reveal to the observant eye. This study is needed because the work of the Japanese was great in little. Its art was rarely monumental or grandiose; its dimensions were for the most part small, its decoration unobtrusive, its colouring sober, its finish faithful and minute, and the objects on which it was lavished often show to the common eye, and at a small distance, as no other and no better than the common modern trawsties. The Japanese artist in metal or iron frequently worked as it were with a magnifying glass; the objects on which he lavished his skill are almost microscopic in dimensions. He aimed at overcoming every difficulty, at expending on a button (*Netsuké*) or a small *menouki*—the ornament of a sword hilt not more than an inch in length—art such as a Benvenuto Cellini would have lavished on a goblet, a shield, or a statue. Thus work which is in its strength of outline and vigour of expression almost worthy of Michael Angelo, may be found upon a *menouki* or *netsuké* not bigger than a thumb nail.

With this brief introduction I will at once proceed to speak of that department of art in which the Japanese are supreme among nations, and which is characteristic of the origin of their arts, and of the character of the nation. The art of Japan, as with most primitive nations, was an art born under the influences, and which set itself to satisfy the tastes, of the warrior and the priest; the art of the metal worker was lavished upon the armour and the sword of the soldier, and the images of the temple.

#### METALS, ARMS, AND ARMOUR.

I do not seek here to set out the history of the origin of arms in Japan; the age of stone existed there as among other primitive people.

The earliest fables of the history of Japan are concerned with weapons with which the gods were armed; and in the temples of Japan are preserved arms of very early date, having an authentic history.

In the mythology of Japan, Izanagi and Izanami touched chaos with the spear point

when they separated from the ocean the primitive islands of which Japan is a conglomeration. And Susanowo, brother of the Sun goddess, employed a mythical sword with which to kill the eight-headed serpent, whom he took care, however, first to intoxicate.

Authentic arms of the 8th century are the most ancient of those known to exist in Japan. They belong to the Emperor Shomu; date A.D. 724 to 764. There exists in Nara, the ancient capital of Japan, a Buddhist temple called Todaiji, founded in 764 by order of the Emperor. In the court of this temple are three stores containing antique treasures, and which have been known for the last eleven centuries under the name of Mitsugura, of Nara. They include objects of the greatest archaeological history and importance, and especially those which belong to the Emperor Shomu; and it is these objects and the ancient catalogues of them which serve chiefly to constitute the history of the ancient metal work of Japan. Other great temples of the provinces around the ancient capital are also fertile in precious examples of the historic arts of Japan. Some of these are said to be prior to the 8th century, but as their authenticity is doubtful, it is unnecessary here to refer to them. Moreover, as the Emperor Shomu was the great patron of high artistic productions of the earliest known periods of artistic work in Japan we need not for a moment attempt to carry back history to more doubtful anterior periods.

From the artistic point of view, the metal work upon arms and armour in Japan presents itself under three kinds—chasing, incrustation, and *repoussé* hammer work. These three kinds of work are found either in simple form or combined. Sometimes the work presents pure examples of chasing, incrustation, or *repoussé*, and sometimes the two or three kinds of work are found on the same piece.

To facilitate the review, I will briefly divide Japanese metal work into three series, viz. :—

(1) Helmets and cuirasses; (2) Swords and sword mounts, and (3) Hieratic and domestic bronzes; and I will endeavour to sketch out their history in a few lines.

I avoid, for the sake of brevity, devoting any special mention to other arms, such as spears, bows, arrows, &c., because they are less frequently the subject of special artistic ornamentation, and hardly sufficiently important to form the subject of a special study in this rapid outline.