

**REVIEW OF THE CHAPTER
ON PAINTING IN GONSE'S
"L'ART JAPONAIS"**

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OF
THE CHAPTER ON PAINTING
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GONSE'S “L'ART JAPONAIS.”

BY
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THE
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REVIEW

OF THE

CHAPTER ON PAINTING IN L'ART JAPONAIS.¹

THE new work on Japanese Art, by the famous art editor and critic, M. Louis Gonse, of Paris, differs from its predecessors in the following points: It does not record for us the incomplete and hasty observations of a traveller; neither does it attempt to beguile us with *à priori* deductions spun out of ignorant enthusiasm and irrelevant philosophy; neither is it a jumble of disconnected facts, errors, and curio-dealers' jargon masquerading under cover of pretentious titles and aimless magnificence. Moreover, it has for its author a trained writer, whose easy, lucid, and forcible style is a perpetual attraction; a critic, also, whose high scholarly attainments, joined with a rare sympathetic facility for perceiving good in however novel a form, have specially fitted him for his delicate task; and, finally, an investigator and collector, whose exceptional position in European art circles has afforded him every opportunity for research. If, now, we add to these advantages the fact that several Japanese gentlemen have taken special interest in showing him specimens and furnishing him with information, it will not appear strange that M. Gonse's

¹ Reprinted from the "Japan Weekly Mail" of July 12, 1884.

book is the one which, alone in its own field, merits the world's serious consideration.

But it is not my purpose on this occasion to attempt any critical estimate of *L'Art Japonais* as a whole, even had I the ability. I must confess to a few general suspicions of error of judgment on the part of the author; but I speak of these only as an introduction to the special matter of my review. In the first place, it seems to me that M. Gonse has made a mistake in attempting to cover too wide a field. All forms of Japanese art come within the scope of his inquiry: lacquer, bronze, porcelain, painting, sculpture, and the rest. Now, in this effort to be encyclopædic he has only scattered his forces; for adequately to treat any single one of these subjects ought to tax the full powers of a competent specialist. It is to be expected, then, that at all points the book suffers from a certain degree of superficiality.

Again, it is hard to understand how M. Gonse, with all his diligence in research, could expect to find in Europe alone sufficient material on which to base a positive estimate. In painting, especially, he must have known that comparatively few representative specimens have ever left their country for the foreign market. One might as well think of studying old European painting by examining the specimens owned in America. A Japanese friend, however, — M. Wakai, the well-known dealer of Tokio, — undertook to make up some of these deficiencies for him. This gentleman not only kindly allowed M. Gonse to use his unpublished notes on the history of Japanese painting, but he succeeded in bringing a loan collection of typical specimens from Japan to Paris, for the special purpose of showing it to

M. Gonse. We have little hesitation in saying that it is to these sources of information furnished by M. Wakai that the author owes the greater part of what is correct in his novel account of Japanese pictorial art. But two things need to be said here: first, that such a loan collection could not, in the nature of things, begin to cover the whole field; and second, that in such matters it is quite inadequate to trust to any single authority, however learned. Who can doubt that, if M. Gonse had been able to spend several years in careful research on the soil of Japan, he might have written a far more complete and useful book?

But our special business in this review is with M. Gonse's long chapter on Painting. This is at once the most attractive and the most original part of his whole work. For, with the exception of a few brief papers read before learned societies, no intelligible account of this special art has hitherto been published in European languages. And I think I am justified in saying that, without any exception at all, M. Gonse's estimate of Japanese paintings is the only one by any European writer which enters into a sufficiently tender and just sympathy with true Japanese taste and aims. It is not enough to approach these delicate children of the spirit with the eye of mere curiosity, or the cold rigid standards of an alien school. One's heart must be large enough to learn to love as the Japanese artist loves, before the veil can be lifted to the full splendor of their hidden beauties. I cannot pay M. Gonse a higher compliment than to say that, from a distant land, he has been enabled to enter this inner temple of appreciation, still closed as it is to many European residents on the soil of Japan itself.

And yet, in the criticism which follows, I have much fault to find with M. Gonse's facts and criticisms; but I trust that he will take also for a compliment this effort of mine. If it were not that his work were so good, one would hardly trouble one's self to attempt to improve it. But M. Gonse has unconsciously laid himself open to the charge of leading the public astray, in the distinct and positive claim of general accuracy which he makes at the end of his preface. "I have gone to the bottom of the matter," he says in effect, "and although details may be hereafter added, yet my essential conclusions are ultimate and correct." This boast was undoubtedly an unfortunate one, and M. Gonse ought to have known better than to make it. Yet, once made, it has to be dealt with; and silence would be friendly neither to M. Gonse nor to his readers. I need then make no further apology for the earnestness of my criticism. If, from his work, I rightly judge M. Gonse's enthusiasm to be genuine, he will be the first to thank me cordially for errors corrected, or points of importance and interest added.

M. Gonse's chapter on Painting occupies the second half of his first volume. To the historical and descriptive sketch which fills the first half, I shall refer only incidentally. He makes a good beginning in estimating painting as the most important of Japanese arts. He has been almost the first European to see that all other decorative arts cannot be understood except by referring back to their basis in pictorial design. Most foreigners in Japan have heretofore persistently maintained that the Japanese had no art of painting proper. To them paintings have been only a single species of curio, to be ranked, under the name of *kakemono*, side by

side with porcelain tea-sets, lacquer boxes, embroidered dressing-gowns, and bronze jewellery. An American to whom I was once speaking of Japanese pictorial beauties gave voice to the prevalent perplexity by exclaiming, "But *do* the Japanese have pictures, — *real* pictures, you know, in gold frames?" It is refreshing to find M. Gonse understanding that Japanese painting is much more than merely decorative, and indeed worthy to rank side by side with the design of great European masters.

On page 152 M. Gonse refers to Dr. Anderson as a collector and a student; but he does not seem to be acquainted with that gentleman's paper read before the Asiatic Society, and he mentions his views only as quoted in the volume of Mr. Reed. It cannot perhaps be said that our author has added very materially to the stock of facts presented in Dr. Anderson's paper. It is in the extent and vigor of his critical estimates alone that he passes far beyond the range of the latter writer.

With regard to illustrations of paintings, I may say here, what I intend to enforce throughout this review, that M. Gonse has relied too exclusively on printed collections of copies. In the first place, the copies themselves, mostly by Tanyu, were not careful reproductions, but only rough notes to supplement memory; and, in the second, Japanese wood-engravers, with all their cleverness, have never learned to reproduce the gradations of tint in good paintings, but have been satisfied with blotchy black masses which bear no resemblance to the tones of the originals. No wonder, then, that M. Gonse's reproductions of these engravings are quite worthless for a comparative study of styles.

M. Gonse's speculations as to the origin of Japanese art (see pp. 127, 163, 198) are wild in the extreme. There is a flavor in Japanese art, he thinks, not to be found in Chinese. Even Japanese Buddhist art is much nearer to the graceful excellence of the Indian than to the hard, ungenial qualities of the Chinese. Persian influences are continually cropping out. A wave of Aryan culture, at some time divided into northern and southern currents by the stubborn boundaries of China, has been able uncontaminated to push eastward to the Pacific. Corea also betrays in its art a marked Indo-European influence. In short, it is a great mistake to say that the art of the East has been dominated by China. But upon what does M. Gonse rely in making up his estimate of Chinese pictorial art? If Japanese painting has been hitherto a *terra incognita* to European critics, what shall we say of the art of Ancient China? Where has he seen representative specimens of old Chinese Buddhist painting? On what grounds can he assert that the influence of Persia and India has not passed through the mediumship of China? It is clear that M. Gonse entirely misunderstands the nature of the great Chinese art; and, of course, such wild historical conjectures are out of place in this age of the world. The mutual relations of the civilizations and arts of China, Corea, and Japan are now tolerably well known. It is sufficiently accurate to say that in the art of painting nearly everything has come from China, not merely in germ, but in model, with the exception of a few, and, in some cases, quite brilliant, native original modifications. The pure Japanese element, if it exists, is a later product of temperament and historical situation, after the vitalizing contact with China.