CLP 195 (1975)

J. Hillier. The Uninhibited Brush: Japanese Art in the Shijō Style, London, Hugh M. Moss Ltd., 1974.

Published in Oriental Art NS vol. XXI no. 4 Winter 1975, pp. 375-79.

The author of a first book on any school of artists faces a special set of responsibilities of which, if he is a good scholar and good writer, he will be keenly aware. His is the task not only of gathering and presenting information about his subject as accurately as he can, but also of weighing the artists and their works critically to decide which to stress and which to pass over quickly, as well as of assessing the art-historical position and importance of the whole school within its tradition. Of course the works of art will survive unchanged whatever he may say about them; but he can have the bad effects of sending the study of his subject off on an unfruitful track, directing later students to a wrong set of problems, or imposing on both popular and scholarly understanding of the school a conceptual and critical framework that may prove not to be very useful. The early history of Oriental art studies in the West displays, along with the brillant achievements that we still respect, sufficient examples of such false starts from which, in some cases, it has taken us a long time to recover, if indeed we have recovered.

J. Hillier faced these responsibilities in writing this, the first book in a Western language on the Shijō School in Japanese painting. (Moreover, there is, to the best of my knowledge, no single study of the subject in Japanese that is so comprehensive and readable.) Hillier has succeeded admirably, giving us a book that will please long-time admirers of these artists and win for them many new enthusiasts. It is, to begin with, in design and printing one of the most beautiful books on Oriental art that we have had; the publisher, Hugh M. Moss, and the designers, Graham Johnson and Robert Hutchinson, deserve the warmest congratulations. The book is a pleasure to hold, leaf through, and read, if only because of the quality of the binding, the paper, the typography, and the plates--247 of them, including 87 tipped-in color plates, all interspersed throughout the text, not grouped at the end. When we add to these attractions Hillier's enviably flexible and graceful prose style, and the fascination of the material he is treating, we have a volume that surely will not join those informative and otherwise worthy books that prove resistant to repeated attempts at penetration and end by sitting unread on the shelf.

Although Shijō painting has received far less attention outside Japan than Rimpa, Ukiyoe, or even (in recent years) Nanga, it was admired and collected by some early European and American students of Japanese art, and receives, for instance, substantial treatment (relative to other schools) in Arthur Morrison's The Painters of Japan (1911). Interest in it slipped after that, perhaps because it was associated with a "Japanesey" taste for the decorative; as understanding for other schools grew; it began to look somewhat superficial. Here as elsewhere, nineteenth century taste came to be regarded as a limitation to be transcended. Now, judging from the good examples entering our collections, Shijō painting is being taken seriously again, as indeed it should be. To be sure, factors of price and availability figure prominently in the upsurge of collecting of Shijō, and of Edo period painting generally--the effect of these factors will eventually have to be faced when we try to decide whether certain late painters, such as Chikutō and Kinkoku, really merit all the attention they have received lately, or whether they have come to occupy such conspicuous places in our view of Edo painting simply by being so amply represented in our collections. But there are more solid reasons than this for the Shijō School's rising popularity. Hillier calls it "the most spontaneous and therefore the most perfect demonstration of the painterly qualities" of brushwork and lyricism which, he feels, when properly de-mystified must appeal powerfully to the modern sensibility. Owen Holloway in his Graphic Art of Japan (1957) had argued already that the

Shijō printed picture books (gaf~~y~~u) had a stronger claim to our admiration, by present-day aesthetic standards, than (for instance) the endlessly reproduced landscape prints of Hiroshige; but this was a somewhat partisan contention, stated with a belligerance truculence meant to annoy those who do not (as the reviewer does) share Holloway's preference. To find an established Ukiyoe specialist like Hillier coming out on the side of "the quieter, subtler art" of Shijō is more significant; balances are at last being righted.

The scope of the volume goes considerably beyond the Maruyama and Shijō Schools. The former is made up, properly speaking, of the followers of Maruyama Ōkyo (1733-1795), the latter of followers of Matsumura Goshun (1752-1811), who was himself an Ōkyo disciple. There is an introductory chapter on Ōkyo, one on Goshun (with some notes on Buson, his first teacher,) and, for contrast, one on Ōkyo's most independent pupil, Nagasawa Rosetsu (1755-1799). Later chapters treat over fifty painters who belong to these schools and others that are to some degree offshoots of them, such as the Kishi and Mori Schools.

The grouping is loose but seems valid; dissimilar as they are, these artists make up a segment of Edo Period painting that is distinct from Nanga, Ukiyo-e, and the Kanō School. Defining the common traits of their styles, however, is not easy. The origins for many of these traits, to be sure, appear in the works of Ōkyo, but those works are themselves so heterogeneous, painted in so many styles or manners, that resemblances to them cannot constitute criteria for inclusion in a school. Japanese scholars have recently used the term shasei-ga or "painting done from life"--loosely "naturalistic painting"--for this group of artists, and Hillier seems to take the same line of approach, for instance in distinguishing the early period of Goshun as a disciple of Buson from his later, Ōkyo-influenced activity as the founder of the Shijō School, seeing in the latter an increase in naturalism. On the other hand, the "Uninhibited Brush" of the title and the emphasis on this quality in discussions of the paintings (e.g. in the description of Nanrei's brushwork, p. 306, as "completely uninhibited") suggests a different view of the school, one not easily reconciled with the first. In fact, although the best of the artists--Ōkyo, Rosetsu, Goshun, a few others--sometimes reached a nice balance between simultaneously achieved effects of naturalism in their images and freedom in their brushwork, most of the artists are neither very naturalistic nor very free. Truly "uninhibited" brushwork is more often seen the works of Nanga painters, for all their invocations of orthodox Chinese models and traditional brush-disciplines; no Shijō artist was so enamored of pure, non-descriptive brush-and-ink as Gyokudō, or Mokubei, or Tessai. And the naturalism that Ōkyo and the others display in their sketches comes to be diluted in the more conventionalized execution of their finished paintings--Hillier's juxtaposition of Ōkyo's "Old Pine Tree in Snow" and Constable's "Elm Tree" (pp. 30-31) makes this point ideally, the latter looking positively photographic in such company, the former very traditional and Japanese in spite of its echoes of Western optical realism in the light-and-shadow rendering of trunk and branches. In the hands of the later Shijō masters, the characteristic school techniques are even less illusionistic or descriptive in effect, and more schematic. For instance, the broad, shaded brushstroke made with an unevenly inked brush (often the flat brush called hake), is employed by Ōkyo sometimes for strikingly volumetric rendering of forms; one might even place the genesis of the whole school at the moment when he realized that the illusionistic device of shading to be seen in Occidental engravings, achieved there by hatching, could be closely approximated through the use of shaded brushstrokes which were already part of the Far Eastern painting tradition--numerous examples can be found in Chinese paintings of the late Ming and Ch'ing, paintings of the kind that Ōkyo must have known. But this brilliant adaptation of an old technique to a new end quickly became itself a convention, which at most produced a general impression of volume. After Ōkyo, and even more after the generation of his direct followers, shasei-ga scarcely seems to the point. Even so, the style retained enough illusionistic potential for Takeuchi Seihō, inspired by a new wave of admiration for Occidental realism, to use it (or an extension of it) in his imitations of the West, such as his extraordinary "Moon Over Venice" of 1904. Hillier (pp. 362-3) rightly regards Seihō's later work as a break with his Shijō background; but many of the earlier paintings seem to attempt still another reconciliation of West with East (after, that is, the attempts of Ōkyo, Kazan, and others) on the basis of the Shijō style "corrected according to nature."

If one hesitates at rating some of the nineteenth century Shijō masters quite as high as Hillier does, and finds too much of their work facile, this does not diminish one's feeling of gratitude to him for bringing together more information about these artists than has previously been easily available (Japanese scholars have paid them scant attention) and of admiration for the succinct, perceptive treatments he gives them. The sparcity of evidence has not discouraged Hillier from attacking complex problems, such as clarifying the identity and activity of Satō Suiseki, known chiefly as the artist of two dazzlingly original and beautiful woodblock-printed picture books (gafu). As in the case of Sharaku, a combination of artistic brillance and enigma makes this painter an especially enticing art-historical puzzle. Another, still unsolved, is the identity of Sōkyūshi, the artist of Kishi Empu, also one of the most beautiful of the gafu produced by, or after designs by, painters of this group.

The gafu, along with the rarer single prints of this school, are allotted about one third of the plates in Hillier's book, and receive a proportionate treatment in the text. Such an emphasis is well justified, since the gafu are in artistic quality equal to paintings by the same artists, and often (as in Ukiyo-e) superior to them. (One of the mysteries of the Shijō School is exactly that: why cannot one find more regularly in the paintings the compositional inventiveness, the inspired draftsmanship, of pages in the same artists' gafu?) These books have been known in the West since the nineteenth century, and may have played a larger part in the infusion of new stylistic ideas into French painting than has been suspected—some of the innovations credited to Ukiyo-e influence seem to have more plausible sources here, and until this possibility has been seriously investigated we must, for instance, hold off on agreeing with Hillier (pp. 202-3) that the affinities between Suiseki and Bonnard are "sheer accident." Apart from that question, these books, along with others of the Nanga and Rimpa Schools from the same period (the very end of the eighteenth century and the first few decades of the nineteenth,) probably display the finest truly idiomatic use of the wood-block-print medium in Japanese art—idiomatic, that is, in contrast to the reproductive character of Ukiyo-e prints which remain more bound, for all their exquisite refinements of design and color, to the fine-line and color-wash technique of the paintings.

One of the most complicated and touchy issues in the study of Edo painting is that of influences from China. Hillier treats it, on the whole, with understanding and judicious balance. Still, one can argue with a few of his observations. He properly rejects (p. 232) the eulogies of Chinese painting by writers such as George Rowley as an art so spiritualized and rarefied that artists of other traditions can only aspire hopelessly toward it, but then reveals a touch of bias on his own part: "no Chinese artist could ever have achieved. . . the clear-sighted literalness of [Sesshū's] great Mōri scroll." If "clear-sighted literalness" refers to that penetrating observation of nature that Japanese scholars are forever crediting to Sesshū, one must demur. When we compare any section of the Mōri scroll with one of the Sung works (such as Hsia Kuei's great "Clear and Remote View of Streams and Mountains," on which one passage in Sesshū's scroll is based) that lie far behind it—although not so far behind as nature does—we see immeidately where Sesshū's clear sight has in fact been principally focused: on the works of his Ming contemporaries of the Che School. The idea that Edo period painters in Kyoto could see only a few original Chinese paintings, and had to depend on woodblock-printed picture books (pp. 233-4), although this too is asserted by the best Japanese authorities, must be heavily modified even for the eighteenth century; and by the early nineteenth, when Kawamura Bumpō was active, there is ample evidence in the writings of painters and others, exhibition lists, etc. for the availability of large numbers of Chinese works. These played a much more important role in the formation and development of Nanga style, and probably Shijō as well, than has been generally recognized. (This problem will be dealt with by the present reviewer in a study now in progress of Sakaki Hyakusen, 1697-1752.) Shen Ch'üan or Shen Nan-p'in, while never considered a major master in China, is by no means absent from Chinese records of painters, as Hillier states (p. 235), and his works have been preserved in Chinese collections as well as Japanese. But the arguement toward which Hillier is here assembling his evidence, for the virtual independence of Bumpō from Chinese stylistic sources, is a sound one; the references to Kanga or Chinese (style) painting in Bumpō's book titles and his frequent depiction of subjects from Chinese literature and legend should indeed not be misinterpreted.

At appropriate places throughout the book Hillier introduces apt and revealing comparisons with the European tradition of painting; the passage on animal painting that opens the chapter on the Mori School (p. 248) is a good example. He does this without succumbing to the temptation to use the East as a stick in belaboring the West, or slipping into the popular romantic-mystical mode of writing about things Oriental. The statement that the Japanese painter treats animals and birds "as equal co-inhabitants of the world" in keeping with "a traditional attitude, subconscious for the most part no doubt and hardly amounting to a philosophy or religion" strikes just the right note, as does the description of this attitude as "a quite unsentimentalized fellow-feeling for the rest of animate nature." The study of Oriental art could use a lot more writing of this sensitive and solid (i.e. non-gaseous) kind.

Two minor corrections, finally. The *Oranda megane* (p. 18) was not "akin to a stereoscope," but was a fairly simple monocular device by which one gazed on an illuminated perspective print or painting through a lens and mirror arrangement. Ōkyo not only saw one, but did pictures for it himself. The Saami Restaurant (p. 27) is not located to the north of Kyoto, but in the eastern section, behind Maruyama Park; it is still (or was a few years ago) noted for the excellence of its *kaiseki* dinners and for accomodations that offered the elegant discomforts (antique plumbing, hard pillows) for which lovers of traditional Japanese culture will pay so gladly and so dearly.

James Cahill

Added note, 2009/5: I was always good at last sentences; this is a fine example. Henry Beville, the photographer for my Skira book, and I had been put up at the Saami while in Kyoto (by Akiyama's arrangement) so I wrote from experience.