ARTS, CRAFTS AND TRADES

*Korean origin of Japanese art - Causes of artistic decline in Korea - Last remnants of art - Mats, hardware and chests - Korean theory of value - Trade guilds and their privileges - The* pu-sang

If you leaf through any book dealing with Japanese art, you will see that every single one of the fine arts for which Japanese artists are so admired today was introduced to those islands and taught by Korean masters. The oldest artistic monuments that you can admire in the Empire of the Rising Sun are of Korean manufacture. In the temple of Horyugi, near Nara, you can see a mural painting which is believed to date back to 607 AD, the oldest painting anywhere in Japan: it is the work of a Korean priest. In Nara itself, the beautiful series of tutelary gods carved in wood that can be admired in the temple of Ni-o is ascribed to a Korean sculptor who flourished in the seventh century of the present era. The most highly prized examples of Japanese porcelain, which is so greatly appreciated, are undoubtedly of Korean origin. Satsuma porcelain is believed to originate from a colony of Korean potters brought to Japan by General Nabeshima in 1498, when the Japanese evacuated the peninsula after Hideyoshi's death. Dr. Allen, it is true, believes that the potters who emigrated with Nabeshima settled in the province of Higen and that the Korean colony of Satsuma, a province where even today there are villages of undoubted Korean origin, was founded there by that Daimyo on another occasion. However that may be, it is beyond dispute that the Japanese were taught this art, like the others, by the Koreans.

All this would suggest that it is still possible to find something in Korea which would at least remind us of the wonders of that glorious past. Instead, unfortunately, there is nothing left any more, or at least very little. The decline of art in Korea is not a recent phenomenon; it goes back to the advent of the current dynasty over five centuries ago.

There were two main causes: first the removal of the capital from Song-do to Seoul, and then the ban on the Buddhist faith.

The most celebrated artists of the peninsula were based in Song-do, the wealthy capital of the kings of Ko-ryu. The renowned porcelain wares of Korea - if you want to admire some fine examples today, you have to visit the *British Museum*, or the *Louvre* or, better still, the *Ueno* *Hakubutsu Kuan* (Imperial Museum) in Tokyo - were manufactured exclusively in Song-do. When General Yi left that city to settle in Seoul, the citizens of Song-do viewed this very damaging change with disfavour and sided with the partisans of the old regime. Many of them were fiercely persecuted by the new rulers, others sought escape by emigrating to Japan, and none of the established artists followed the new court to Seoul. As a result the production of artistic porcelain, after enjoying periods of great splendour, suddenly ceased. The few examples of these porcelain wares in existence today come for the most part from the families of former Song-do courtiers who brought them with them when they moved to Seoul in the wake of the new king. Others were found in old tombs that Koreans and Japanese hastened to plunder as soon as they saw how much Europeans prized those old broken vases. The pieces in the *Louvre* come for the most part from excavations carried out for the construction of the current French Legation in Seoul, where the palace of one of King Taì-giò’s chief ministers once stood.

If the removal of the capital from Song-do to Seoul was a very heavy blow for Korean art, it was the ostracising of the Buddhist cult decreed by the kings of Ciu-sen that dealt the fatal blow.

Buddhist worship, with its ceremonial and decorative sides and its taste for the theatrical, captivating the senses but imprisoning the mind, constituted the most powerful and perhaps the only *raison d'être* of Korean art. While enriching its temples and heightening the splendour of its ceremonies, the Buddhist faith gradually widened its field of action, and art found therein reasons for ever-increasing production, emulation and progress. The achievements of one were the progress of the other. Nor was there anything abnormal in this, since at bottom we see in the history of every people that it is the religious idea which first gives rise to art, and then art takes root, flourishes, evolves, regresses and becomes debased, just as the religious sentiment which gave birth to it progressed, changed, weakened and faded away.

Only after reaching a very advanced state of development was it possible for art to escape the influence of the religion to which it was enslaved, and progress in safety, free from any pre-established bond. And there again this emancipation of art from the religious idea is basically only an indication of an ethical change in the consciousness of the people.

The Buddhist religion was banned, and suddenly there was no longer any demand for those vases, bronzes, paintings and sculptures which represented the entire production of Korean art, and which were produced solely to embellish the temples, shrines and domestic altars dedicated to the worship of the Buddha. Since this phenomenon coincided with the exodus of artists from Korea, no one could find any valid reason to fill the void they left, and the arts quickly declined.

The last remnants of the golden age of Korean art disappeared with the destructive Japanese expedition led by Hideyoshi, and the last remaining families of Korean artists were taken to Japan by the same expedition.

While in Japan the rapid spread of the Buddhist religion and the pomp surrounding the shogunate and the feudal courts of the Daimyo provided a favourable environment for the arts which the Korean masters had introduced and which soon rose to that peak of perfection observed at the beginning of the Meiji era, in Korea the continual internal struggles, the incessant depredations of neighbours and the ostentatious display of an exaggerated poverty designed to dispel its reputation for wealth and so discourage any new enemy conquests, necessarily prevented, not only a revival of those arts that have now disappeared, but even the simple spontaneous manifestation of any attempt at artistic creation.

This lack of artistic production is what first strikes the visitor to Korea, especially if he has come from Japan and is still dazzled by the splendours of Nikko and Kyoto and the delightful lines of the thousand *kakimono, inro, netsuké*, embroidered fabrics, vases, screens and armour, which day after day he found impossible to resist in that blessed land - his first impression of Korea can only be disastrous. In the whole of Seoul you will not find a single shop where some object attracts your attention by its original shape or graceful lines, and if you are a tourist pressed for time you will leave the Korean capital without finding anything even slightly rare to take back with you.

However, if you stay for a long time, and are very patient and very persevering, little by little, by dint of walking around and asking, you will end up making the odd little find and acquiring some good examples of those few works of art which, in spite of everything I have said, are still made.

The best of these are without a doubt the rice straw mats from the islands of Kang-wha and Kyo-dong. It is difficult to find anywhere else finer, lighter mats with such harmonious designs than the ones made in the Korean islands. The most beautiful specimens can be admired in the imperial palaces; some of them are very large, over forty or fifty square meters, all of one piece. However, it is difficult to obtain similar mats, because they are made in Kang-wha expressly for the Palace or to be sent as tribute to the Emperor. The ones made in Kyo-dong, on the other hand, are of more modest size and can be found with relative ease.

Regarding these mats, I am reminded of a little story a German merchant told me one day which illustrates the Korean conception of the laws governing the value of things very neatly. This gentleman, admiring the beauty of the mats, thought that they would easily lend themselves to a lucrative export trade since they could usually be bought very cheaply in Korea, but would fetch much higher prices if they were shipped to Europe and sold there. He went to see one of the Kang-wha artisans who he had been told was among the most talented, and after much discussion and the usual endless string of useless words, they agreed on a unit price of, let us say, 3 dollars. When the price had been settled, the German said:

“That’s fine, but if I order a thousand, you won’t want me to pay $ 3,000, will you?”

“Oh, no, no, that's understandable” replied the other.

“So how much do we agree on for a thousand mats?”

The old Korean thought about it, made all his calculations, and then said:

“Well now, for a thousand mats you must give me 4,000 dollars.”

“What! But we said 3 dollars for one ... and now for a thousand you want 4,000?”

“Oh, yes, but I didn't know that you needed it so much!”

And there was no way he would budge: “I can let you have one,” he said, “for three dollars, but if you want a thousand that shows you need it badly, and the deal we struck is too favourable for you, and therefore you must give me more.” You can see from this how difficult it must be to do business with the Koreans.

After the mats, wrought iron objects with silver niello-work come next. These objects are only produced in the province of Hoang-haì Do, and even then they are only made to order for the Court or some *yang-ban*. The most usual objects are tea chests with a movable lid, and very large boxes for tobacco, with a puller and secret closure. They are invariably decorated, often very skilfully, with Chinese motifs: the familiar characters meaning *happiness, wealth and offspring* are the most commonly used. Other objects, such as trays, braziers, candlesticks, bits, bolts and padlocks, were once made along the same lines, but now it is very difficult to find any good examples. I had the good fortune, on one of the very first days of my stay in Seoul, to lay my hands on a magnificent candlestick, of exquisite workmanship; later I wanted to get a second one, but I was never able to find one, not even by offering ten times what I paid for the first one.

When the small chests that are sold in Seoul in Cabinet Street, which took its name from them, are added to these objects, the list of current Korean artistic products is complete. There are three main kinds of chests, those made in Seoul, those made in Ciul-la Do, and those that are made in Pyeng-an Do. Generally speaking, Seoul chests are the least beautiful: they are either large and massive in natural wood with brass ornaments, or smaller, very roughly lacquered in red and similarly decorated with brass fittings. The chests made in Ciul-la Do are of better quality, with very ordinary black lacquer and mother-of-pearl incrustations; but the most highly prized of all, the only ones that have some genuine artistic merit, are the ones made in Pyeng-an Do. Very simple in shape, made of natural dark-coloured wood, decorated only with numerous wrought iron studs, of very detailed and careful design, they recall in some way our old Florentine and Sienese chests of the fourteenth century, and they have the same elegant severity of line. They are relatively inexpensive, and of all the objects mentioned they are the only ones which are manufactured for general use by ordinary people, and can therefore be found without difficulty in the shops.

To find the mats, the iron and silver boxes and those very rare screens and paintings that turn up from time to time in the capital, you have to look in some of the narrow second-hand shops in the northern districts of the city, where they end up, after passing through one of the hundred and more pawnshops in Seoul, the last remnants of the former wealth of some unfortunate impoverished family. But if you really want to find something good you have to make very frequent visits to those filthy *bric-a-brac* shops, where you find a worn shoe, left by some hungry peasant for a few *cents*, next to a tea box with very fine niello work, old bottomless hats next to the remains of a tea pot with no handle or lid, spectacles with no lenses, old buttons, jade ornaments, silk robes and cotton rags, used pipe stoves and antiquated magistrate’s belts, books with torn pages and brushes with no hairs, tattered mats, old coins, chipped porcelain, broken glass and bronze chandeliers, everything in short that human art can produce, in all genres, of all periods, for all classes, in all states of preservation, all mixed up in the most horrible and dusty confusion. You have to visit these shops often, because their wares are constantly renewed; as soon as you have been sold some object a buyer materializes at once, and the object you saw today will very probably no longer be there tomorrow.

There exists a category of second-hand dealers who only sell to the Europeans living in Seoul. They personally go in search of what they believe would be of most interest to Western amateurs and then come to your house to proffer their wares. They usually turn up around lunchtime –which is also one way of spending that midday hour in less depressing and solitary fashion. They very solemnly unwrap their bundles, take out the few things they have managed to find, and carefully study your face to see what impression they have made, because your expression is the only guide they have to decide how much to charge – apart, that is, from one other: with the same impression the price will be higher or lower depending on the position you occupy. This is another rule of Korean trade: the higher your social position, the more you must pay. A friend of mine who had been living in Seoul as Consul General for several years, one fine day, due to the departure of his minister, found himself occupying the position of Chargé d'affaires: his standard of living did not change in the slightest, he did not increase the purchases he habitually made by one iota, yet automatically, at the end of the month, and for all the months that he continued to hold that office, his expenses came to exactly twice as much as he was previously accustomed to. When the minister returned, his expenses automatically decreased and returned to the normal figure.

The five or six individuals who buy up these artefacts in Seoul – items which are often of curiosity, rather than artistic, value and which in fact go by the collective name of curios in the Far East – are, like all the other merchants in the capital, members of a special corporation that has its recognized head, its rights and its privileges.

These craft guilds are one of the most prominent features of Korean life. There exists a guild for every major item which is bought and sold locally, and no one has the right to sell that particular item if he is not a member of the corporation itself. Thus in Seoul there are the guilds of silk, cotton and rice merchants, of sellers of hats, hardware, brassware, mats, furniture and so on, each of which has its own elected leader, *yong-ni*, who settles the rules of the trade and arbitrates disputes between members of the guild. Those who wish to set up in business as sellers of a certain article must begin by contacting the appropriate corporation, paying the agreed entry fee and obtaining a written licence issued by the head of the guild. If he does not do this, he runs the risk of seeing his shop immediately invaded by members of the corporation and all his goods seized. An exception is made for shops selling "miscellaneous goods" where the most common and best-selling items for daily use are found, such as tobacco, matches, bags, hat ornaments, some items of food and drink, etc.; anyone can open such a shop without a licence of any kind. Another exception is provided by the very ancient custom according to which from the 25th day of the last moon to the 5th day of the first, anyone has the right to sell any item, and in this period hundreds of small improvised shops are seen in Ciong-no, where it is often possible to do some good shopping.

The licence fees due to the Government are not paid individually by the various shopkeepers, but by the guilds which always pay the fees for them from the central fund. This fund, to which all members contribute monthly, also helps members in cases of illness, death, funerals, etc.

Among the various guilds of the capital, the guild of itinerant merchants, *pu-sang-hoi*, which covers the whole peninsula, is of special importance because of the influence it has often had on political events in Korea. These *pu-sang* make up for the lack of shops that can be observed in all Korean villages; they follow pre-established itineraries, visiting all the villages on specific days, carrying on their shoulders their entire stock of goods, which include the most disparate items: hats, shoes, vases, brushes, inks, pins, clothes, and so on. But what makes this corporation special is its dependence on the government. In fact, not only this or that particular ministry, but any governmental office, has the right to request the co-operation of the *pu-sang* in case of need. Thus, if any disorder occurs in a distant village, the magistrate will send the *pu-sang* to arrest the guilty; if some person in authority has to leave for somewhere unsafe, the magistrate responsible for public safety will designate the *pu-sang* to escort him, and so on. Right up to the most important events, when the Emperor feels unsafe on his throne, it is always the *pu-sang* who are called in first. The last time this corporation was in the news was in 1897, when it was assembled in Seoul on the occasion of the decree dissolving the *Independence Circle*. Real battles were fought between the members of this political circle and the *pu-sang* on the streets of the capital, until the government, for fear of greater troubles, hastened to send the latter back to the province.

Among themselves, the *pu-sang* are very close-knit and help each other very loyally. So, for example, if one of them has some grudge against a stranger, or has to collect money owed to him, or wants the settlement of a debt postponed, he has only to mention it to one of his fellow members and the matter is settled in no time at all.

When the opposing party sees some twenty sinewy, muscular, taciturn *pu-sang* coming towards him, in the evening, in some isolated spot, making as if to roll up their sleeves as soon as they see him from afar, you can be sure that it will not take a lot of talk to get him to do what they want!