



BRONZE BUDDHA.

(TOKUGAWA PERIOD)

ON A BRONZE BUDDHA IN THE U. S. NATIONAL MUSEUM.*

BY CHARLES DE KAY.

The fine arts of Japan have been known in the West for many centuries and like the cognate arts of China have received the sincerest form of flattery, imitation. Yet a true knowledge is still to come. Between a barbarian contempt for eastern art and the claim of a recent Japanese art-commission returning from a voyage around the world, that the only living art to-day is that of Nippon, there must be a middle term. We are only beginning to assume toward the oriental mind that attitude of sympathy which is necessary to the understanding of its products. Moreover, we are only on the threshold of the historical and legendary view of the development of the fine arts of the extreme Orient, which forms the second and almost equally important basis for appreciation. So it comes that, notwithstanding the wealth of examples of many branches of the fine arts belonging to the Middle Flowery Kingdom and to Nippon, such matters as porcelain and bronze are still regions largely unexplored. In porcelains the beautiful book of Stanislas Julien is invaluable; with regard to bronzes from Japan the old writer Kaempfer and the comparatively modern F. von Siebold did excellently for their time and generation, yet have left the field open for separate and exhaustive treatises.

One branch of art throws light on another. Thus the French work by M. Goussier and the still more useful volumes lately published in London by Dr. Anderson, dealing as they do very largely with the paintings or water colors of the Japanese, will be of inestimable service to the man who has the leisure and talents to devote a book to bronzes from Japan. The present sketch, which revolves round the bronze Buddha lately bought for the National Museum, does not presume to speak of more than a few pieces belonging to the two chief religions of Japan, namely, to Buddhism, the popular faith introduced from the main-land about twelve hundred years ago by Koreans and Chinese, who brought with them a transformed species of the great religion born in but ejected from India; and to Shintoism, the former state religion of Japan. The latter appears to have been formed from Chinese

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Confucianism, to have absorbed the original spirit and hero-worship of the Japanese, and to have borrowed something from Buddhism itself.

Bronze work resembles other Sinico-Japanese art in its apparent lack of distinctiveness, its seeming unity of impression on those who have not studied it well. As the individuals of an Asiatic or African people seem to be all alike until familiarity with them develops as great differences, man from man, as we find in Europe, so a close examination of Japanese bronzes brings one to the point where the work of the different epochs betrays different characteristics, and individual workmen in metal emerge from the common herd of designers and casters into artists of renown. In the east great respect is paid to tradition in art. Families of artisans have inherited certain ways of work. Religion has been powerful enough to counteract the impulse to be original by deviating from the models of the past. Difficult as the question must be until some one resident in Japan, having access to the temples and museums under government control, and yet acquainted with the contents of public and private collections in Europe, shall found a system of the history of Japanese bronzes, it is possible to distinguish three grand epochs.

The first is represented by the meager yields of grave-mounds. An early wave of conquest appears to have come from the south, favored by the prevailing winds and currents, and brought the men of bronze weapons and implements, before whom the native race, perhaps the hairy people called Ainus, perhaps a mixture of this people with settlers from Korea who had iron weapons, gradually receded toward the north. The second is the great religious epoch, started with a wave of Buddhism from Korea about the time that Europe was settling down after the conquests of the heathen, when missionaries were sallying out from Rome on the one side, and Ireland on the other, and things were shaping themselves for Charlemagne to found his empire. To this epoch belong the gigantic Buddhas at Nara and Kamakura. The third period is associated with the political supremacy of the Tokogawa clan, and runs from about 1600 nearly to our day, say 1868. The Japanese are now in the fourth period, where they are profoundly influenced by the western world in their arts as well as in their polity, and, as many native and foreign observers think, very unfortunately influenced.

From considering Japanese bronzes to have a marked family likeness, one soon learns to note the greatest distinctions among them. In general, one may say that intricate design and bold combinations of high and low relief, technical knowledge in founding, and fantastic subjects, belong to the third or flourishing epoch lately ended. Not that very beautiful, simple, big work is lacking to the present century, but it does not represent the rule.

But however we may distinguish, however we may, according to temperament or training, prefer on the one hand the big sober work of

earlier centuries, or, on the other, the enormously clever design, the bewildering luxuriance of form and suggestion, shown during the period of two centuries and a half lately elapsed, we can not withhold wonder and admiration from the Japanese for their work in bronze in all epochs. It has the stamp of individuality as most European work has not. Bronzes with us are too apt to look like things turned out of a hopper, like buttons from a mill. The profusion of ornament which alarms and irritates fastidious people who have formed their taste on masterpieces surviving from the great Greek and Italian epochs, becomes interesting so soon as the meaning of the various decorative *motifs* dawns on them. Thus the crane is associated with a certain sage, hero, or saint who is a sort of patron god of knowledge and longevity. The tortoise is a symbol wishing one long life; the peach blossom means that the giver desires the recipient to be beloved and to become the parent of lovely children.

There is a mighty cosmogony, there is a vast and bewildering hagiology, there is a labyrinth of legend, in which Buddhist ascetics, local Buddhas, old heroes of the people, animals endowed with magical powers, and even inanimate things which take on life, are fit subjects for the potter and the founder in bronze. The result is that one is tempted to say that no country has ever shown bronzes which contain so much human interest by way of subject, so much point with respect to usefulness in temple and house, so much elegance of finish, beauty of shape, and originality of design as the Japanese.

By far the greater part of the bronzes in Japan have to do with the service of a temple. There are many other uses for the metal, of course, such as coinage, weapons, ornaments for the person, utensils for the house, decorative pieces, boxes, trays, flower-holders, and what not. But the houses of nobles in Japan are far from luxurious, and as a rule the costliest things are appointments of or gifts to a temple. Shintoism in its purer form had no idols and few altar-ornaments in its temples, but Buddhism in the form which it has taken far from its seat in India, encouraged these luxuries. Japanese writers who belong to the comparatively free-thinking sects which may be allied to Confucianism have always reproached the native Buddhists with using the fine arts to captivate the multitude, deceiving the eye with pictures and statuettes and the understanding with monkish tricks. They have taken much the same attitude toward Buddhism that the Reformation took toward Roman Catholicism.

On the other hand the same thing was cynically defended on the ground that Buddhist monks were useful in keeping the common people ignorant and steeped in superstition. Or, the argument was, that it suited a certain phase of mind. "People may go so far as to destroy those who hold to names and pictures," wrote a Japanese apologist in 1690 in his preface to the *Buts-zo-dsu-i*, translated by Dr. J. Hoffman into German; "yea, to give to the flames the wooden statues of Buddha. But will the silly layman for that understand any better the glorious

purpose of upward endeavor? The Most Illuminated whom mankind worships, and who in his great mercy did good to all creatures and brought them to salvation, verily he willed that also the silly common man should strive gradually, step by step, to Perfection." The book is a description of native and foreign saints; the writer, apparently by no means a vigorous or ardent believer in Buddhism, makes a shrewd appeal to that class of minds in all parts of the world which sees in religious forms a wholesome regimen for the ignorant.

But since 1874 Buddhism has lost the support of the Shoguns and feudal upper class, owing to the practical abolishment of their power. They were patrons of Buddhism from policy, if not from conviction, and the bronze gifts to temples have fallen off. Moreover, they were patrons of bronze work not religious in purpose, and now they, or such as can be said to represent them, dress like Europeans, aspire to European habits, and use foreign furniture. Last, but not least of all, the full establishment of commerce with the West, before the country was prepared for it, appears to have had for its first effects a singularly rapid and universal lowering of the artistic quality of all objects of art, because cheap and quickly fabricated articles in enormous quantities had to be supplied to America and Europe. From these causes of discouragement the production of good bronzes, that is to say, bronzes of a high artistic, not merely a fine technical quality, has undoubtedly fallen away.

Some connoisseurs prefer the most important castings in bronze made by the early Buddhists of Japan, owing to their grandeur, simplicity, and noble massiveness. Such are the colossal Yakushi in the temple at Nara and the famous Daibuts, or seated figure of Buddha, cast by Kimimaro in A. D. 749. In pottery and *faïence* the same taste is likely to prefer the comparatively small and undecorated pieces which the native collectors treasure in silken bags and fondle with the amiable folly of him who is ridden by his hobby. Professor Morse describes these amateurs as aghast at the overdecorated vases which modern Japanese potters fabricate for us, and which the dealers sell us for pieces of the great epochs.

Besides the colossi mentioned there are other images in bronze of a larger size, but they have rarely left the country. A seated Buddha of this sort, which was exported to the United States before the Japanese became attentive to the need of preserving the monuments of Japan, had a romantic career of neglect and discovery in New York; it is now in the National Museum at Washington, thanks to the knowledge of Mr. Edward Greer, the author of various translations from the Japanese (Plate CVII).

It has a bronze halo, and differs from the beautiful and impressive seated Buddha at Kamakura in size and in the position of the forefingers. These do not touch each other along the two upper joints, but lie one within the other. A slight trait of this kind is of the greatest importance to a Buddhist. It marks the difference between figures

of the greatest of all Buddhas at various moments of his ecstacy or absorption into Nirvana, or it distinguishes *the* Buddha from foreign or local saints who have presumably reached the Buddhahood by meritorious pondering. He has the famous knob on his forehead, about which many legends revolve; also the short round curls over his head, supposed to be the snails which guarded him from sunstroke, and he carries the mark on the top of his head. He has the large ears with their lobes pierced and distended, but no earrings. The figure represents Buddha, after having taught his doctrine, merging himself into Nirvana. To an adept, the position of his thumbs and forefingers expresses a world of hidden meanings.

The figure is luckily provided with a copious inscription which is couched in phrases anything but easy of translation, owing to the curious phraseology of monkish scribes. A Japanese does not use idioms like ours in ordinary matters, but when it comes to writing he is further influenced by the enigmatical style of a literature profoundly influenced by that of China. To this we must add the peculiarity of expressions that were meant originally to translate Sanscrit or Hindoo modes of religious speech which have been further filtered through an obsolete form of Chinese by persons devoid of an exact knowledge of tongues. The sense of the lettering, according to Mr. Greey, is that this, "The Buddha of the Five Wisdoms," was cast by Saburo Biyoyé Katsutaré in the province of Isé, and was dedicated to a temple in Yamada, province of Isé, in the year 1648. Then follow the religious names (for the Japanese laymen took religious names as freely as Catholics who enter monasteries do to-day) of the person who paid for the statue. Then come the religious names of friends and those of the dead whose souls the giver wished to benefit thereby. Then the priest who dedicated the piece is mentioned and he slyly slips in the names of his own ancestors. Finally appears the name of the scribe whom the priest employed to carve the words. The motto of "The Buddha of the Five Wisdoms" is as follows: *All the world can share the blessings of Buddhism.* It may be noted that in Japan the number five has especial sanctity. Thus there are five elements, five yearly festivals, five chief colors, five great laws, five tones in music. The temple where this Buddha was dedicated was that of Joshagan Soan in Yamada. One would like to know if it has survived the wreck of time, the fall of puppet emperors and guardian nobles, of the old worship and the iconoclasm preached by Christians. Shall we suppose that the priest of the temple at Yamada was like that Yekeo Hoshi who is said to have recited, seated mournful in his neglected fane, these verses, paraphrased by Dickens:

My mountain dwelling's roof of thatch
 Is with Yahemúgura moss o'ergrown;
 Of passers-by no glimpse I catch,
 I dwell uncheeréd and alone;
 'Tis autumn time
 And mankind dread the rig'rous clime.

Without doubt there was a celebration of *kai-cho*, or opening of the eyes, when this figure was dedicated in some such temple as that of Ye-keo Hoshi, deserted by the fickle populace for more attractive fanes. The ceremonies were as elaborate and solemn as that in Catholic countries on the dedication of a chapel. Pieces of colored paper were pasted over his eyes, and at a given moment torn off, so that the image might gaze on his worshipers. Not far off stood such a great incense-burner as the hall of a shrine always shows. Mounting on steps, attendant priests constantly replenished it with incense, the offerings of the devout, bought at extortionate prices on the temple grounds. On either side of the alcove where the Buddha sat enthroned, and well outside, rose, we may be sure, two temple lanterns exquisitely cast in bronze. The roof or lid, of the lantern has in high relief the dragon of the rain-clouds holding the magic jewel in his claws. About the pagoda-shaped lantern itself, four fishes spring outward like gargoyles; they are modeled in the round and are very lively looking animals out of their own element. Below the lantern is a bamboo grove with ascetics in half relief. Then comes a frieze of animals representing the hours and the houses of the zodiac. The dragon appears on the stem, answering with that above to the "waters above and the waters below," while the basis of the cosmogony shows in the foot of the lantern with tortoises and conventional waves to represent the ocean.

The whole piece symbolizes the world—water, earth, air, fire, and ether—while the Buddhist saints occupy a significant position high up above the reach of time (the hours and zodiacs), close to the palace of heaven (the pagoda), and the realms of ether (the upper dragon).

Let us examine the incense-burners. They are large, but not of the size that the great popular temples show. Elephant heads form the two arms, and the survival in Japan of Hindoo ideas in religion is further seen in the frieze, which consist of Rakans or magical saints somewhat like the Rishis of India. The bowl into which the incense is thrown is poised upon the heads of three naked wrestlers, who squat under the burden, but are so gross of form, so mighty of muscle, that they bear the round jar with little suggestion of discomfort. No dragon *motif* is used here, for in China and Japan that fabulous beast appears to have largely lost his connection with fire and the sun, in order to undertake the care of rain, cloud, and moisture everywhere.

With some plausibility the dragon is thought to be one remnant of the original native religion taken up by Buddhism in China and Japan. Compared with the monster as depicted in stone and colors by artists of our Middle Ages, it is a graceful creature. Dragons a foot or two long, made of an incredible number of pieces held together, are among the marvels of Japanese workers in iron and bronze; great prices are paid when the foundry-man or iron-smith is a famous artist. They sometimes have a character of their own which justifies one in placing them among serious works of art. When taken in the hand their flex-

ibility and coldness make them seem alive, while their singular motions and threatening look express capitally the fierceness and wayward nature attributed to a symbol of the least stable of elements. To us and to skeptical natives it is a curious, ingenious plaything, but to the Japanese of the old religions or to the Buddhist, it means a good deal more: it is a talisman to exorcise the dangers that lurk in sky and sea.

Here, then, are such specimens of Japanese bronze-work as Americans can examine in their own country, either in museums, in the shops of dealers, or in the private galleries of the country. Perhaps too much has been made of the degeneracy of Japanese workmen in these days. It is true that they seem no longer to have a fixed and definite aim for their energies, but that could hardly be when in political matters all is floating, all is changing. Yet they still show wonderful skill, patience, and fertility of resource; they seem able to imitate almost anything from the past, if not to originate great designs. In metal work especially are they wonderfully strong; it is not too much to say that they lead the world for variety of design, beauty of finish, boldness of relief, and readiness to follow new leads. Despite the croaking of critics native and critics foreign, who shall say that when the genius of these workers in metals shall have adapted itself to the new state of things, it will not take another flight into the realms of high art?