The Japanese Fan

"My love is like the snow on the mountain
Fusayama.
So deep, so deep that it never shall be melted."

The evolution of the Japanese fan is a historic past to its present honoured and dignified supremacy in the "Land of the Rising Sun," in which country the one with the highest position over here, where more often than not it seems to serve as a kind of decorative hallmark of "high art" in the home," is one of those objects which might almost be called an instance of the process of unnatural selection. That our ancestors for spots of colour in our rooms, often pitifully, as we were, on the walls and there transmuted in more or less wild positions and combinations, is answerable for the degradation of that which in its native environment is a thing of beauty and a joy, is self-evident. The "wabu," finding that the more garish and crude he makes his wares for the European market the better they sell, turns out by the thousand and tens of thousands things which reached us first in England some twenty years ago. It is a humiliating contrast to consider these now, alas! almost extinct specimens of the fan, with some of the latest developments in this line; such, for instance (quoting the most atrocious outrage yet seen and let us hope that all charity destined only for nursery decoration), as a map of the globe, or a portrait of royalty or statesman stuck up to improve (?) an otherwise insipid little self-coloured screen, snatching rather of "Brammagem" than of Japan!

It is a far cry from these modern travesties of Japanese art to the origin of the fan, whose invention was long claimed by the Chinese (who are nothing if not ancient), and who dated it as far back as the eleventh century B.C. But the discovery of Egyptologists have, among other discor-dant testimonies to the prior claim of Egypt for a vastly more remote historic past, brought to light the sticks of what had undoubtedly been a feather-fan, in which the holes bored for the insertion of each feather were plainly visible. This interesting little witness to an antique civilisation, now in the British Museum, was found in the tomb of an Egyptian king whose dynasty is computed to have been no later than the sixteenth century B.C.

We may take it for granted, however, that the use of the palm-leaf as a fan needed no particular invention, but must have been a custom among the inhabitants of the lands of its growth from time immemorial; yet it seems a sufficiently safe inference to conclude that to such born artists in decorative design as the Japanese it first occurred to idealise as well as utilise it, when their pre-eminently pre-eminent invention for paper may be traced to the virtuous invention of the "ogi," or paper folding-fan. The shape, by a pretty phantasy, is considered an emblem of the mountain of Japan, and was supposed to have been evolved from a fancied resemblance to it when held open and downwards; this in its turn being a symbol of eternity, because the sticks radiating from a common centre, the beginning of life, are capable of infinite extension into space.

Transcendental Fusayama, the peerless mountain, figures in all sorts and conditions of all sorts and conditions of Japanese fans; whether portrayed with magic touch by such supreme artists as Harunobu, Kusai, and Kitagawa, or upon the costly cardboards of the Ronin, on costly cherished specimens that are mounted and hung on the walls as pictures, or vaguely outprinted on the poorest samples of portable writing paper.

Another characteristic emblem, the cutaiifu (the oldest symbol known the world over), in conjunction with the large red circular disk, is often to be found on the iron battle fans of the ancients. Incongruous to our notions of warfare they played an important rôle in Japan, specially in those long and bitter civil wars which have been termed to our Wars of the Roses; while it is on record that even as recently as thirty years ago a Japanese naval commander carried one into action! Standard-bearers bore huge fans depending from bamboo, which they guarded as zealously as do our ensigns the regimental colours. Soldiers found them an admirable means of defence at close quarters, and the strolling players and wrestlers, who were forbidden by law to carry any other weapon, were able to turn their fans against any one coming within range. When it is remembered that these wrestlers have always aimed and trained to be as fat as possible, it is evident that on this subject alone it is impossible to make a parallel with theirs! The most deadly instrument without doubt is the daggar fan, in its polished case of lacquer, which is manipulated with as great dexterity by the hand as are the lighter and more frequently known as the kari-kari, or happy dispatch, as is its peaceful prototype in the amusements of every-day life.

Of the complexities of use and multiplicities of type of Japanese fan it is impossible to give more than the merest hint. If we turn to the Court with final, from the state fan of the Empress, with its embroidered royal emblem of the chrysanthemum, to that of the poorest commoner, each has its distinctive use and occasion, even to the manner of holding it at various angles when shut, in accordance with rigid rules of Court etiquette, which are far too intricate for any mere outsider to comprehend. There is perhaps one English woman, and one only, to whom these things are no mystery. Mrs. Yoshitama Sanomano is a cosmopolit, who, having married the lord of the ceremonies of the Imperial Court of Japan, has been for many years the confidential friend and adviser of the Empress with whom she is such a favourite that she even handles Majesty's bed-chamber, to which no other woman of Japan save the blood-royal has such access. That she has at least a hidden power over the men on this earth when one learns that the gift of a more or less sumptuous fan is de rigueur from the bride to the bridegroom on their wedding; but the sort in ordinary male use is large, generally of paper and decorated with flowered diapers on a white background.

Anony to fans, to make them to fit the stage and beside actual stage use. They send out the surimono to advertise a change of name, address or play; they issue the kake-ogi, or hanging fan, as a gift to friends, and lastly a folding fan, bearing to the fame and glory of the person they are paying to their continued support, and they sometimes carry the chokuraku fans, with the scenes of the various stages of the great battle fans of the ancients.

The interlude dancer sports a particularly gay variety, and although no female actor is allowed on the stage (the necessary female parts, yet the "geisha" perform at every other sort of entertainment, and often make a shrewd venture to sell to the public the new and flagrant designs of the day, which are brought into play except the feet; immense muscular strength is necessary for these performances, which are usually subject to severe training from early childhood. They require also special gifts of posture, poetry and panache in order to represent the gamut of human passions which they invariably depict in part, or entirely, in their presentation.

The tight-rope dancers, who are so justly renowned, again employ a special type of fan of their own, which is supposed to help them preserve their balance.

There are endless customs concerning fans. On the death or "nou" (corresponding to our New Year's Day) it is usual to exchange fans as we do Christmas or New Year's cards, with verses called Hai-ku inscribed thereon, and often richly shut up on which the Japanese emblems of old age, health, and plenty, a fir branch, a lobster and rice cake. It is also a social custom among the cultured to sell a friend a new fan as an original verse, or draw a design on a fan as a sort of contribution to an album. No person in polite society would think of passing anything in the hand that did not look like a fan, even to the effect of those made for the fan, which then must be held at a half-opened angle. In summer ladies use a peculiar "jusen-fan," which exalts a pleasant odour, taking the place of our smoking-bottles, and also "waterproof fans," which, constantly dipped in water, cool the air when used. Japanese children, rich and poor, are adept with the fan, which is given them at an age when English baby learns to grasp its rattle, and they in their turn place it in the hands of their dolls.

The most popular game, Ogi Otoshi, it goes without saying, is due to the fan, for the player has to throw from a given distance at a "cho" or battery target balanced on top of which the fan must not quite touch, and it is only drawn up for reference.

Returning from the playful to the practical, we find the fan entering into the culinary arrangements, used on the broiling cakes and pressed into all sorts of services. Last but not least, it is a valuable accessory in the religious and ceremonial of the national worship of Japanese, which, far from requiring from all else from our notions of belief, yet must command itself for its teaching, by precept and example, the cardinal virtues of truth, love, duty, and obedience.

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