“Thou shalt, at one glance behold
The daisy and the marigold . . .
And every leaf, and every flower
Pearled with the self-same shower.
Thou shalt see the fieldmouse peep
Meagre from its celled sleep.”

Fifty years ago a series of children’s books by E. Nesbit appeared chapter by chapter in the Strand magazine. Lately I have recovered a number of the books and am as much enchanted with them now as then, although the terrible changes of the last fifty years often give one queer little shocks. “‘Tis shame that one of thy name should have to work for money,” says Miss Nesbit. “We live so safely now; we have nothing to be afraid of.”

In many of these tales the engaging trick is that the children by one means or another—a magic carpet, an amulet, a psammead (a grumblly little animal who grants wishes)—transport themselves into the past (once into the future when E. Nesbit must have been to a lecture by Beatrice Webb or some such). They got into all kinds of trouble, including inviting a Babylonian princess to visit them in London. She turned up and smashed cases in the British Museum to get at her own jewelry.

But it rarely occurs to us, however complaisant we may be about such children’s stories, that a great many people in our day do almost the same thing. In China or Japan if you travel away from the port cities and particularly if you are visiting monasteries you will find yourself not actually living in the past but as visitors to these temples living almost exactly as visitors lived a thousand years or more ago, so that you have attained the Ultima Thule which archaeologists and novelists try to reconstruct. You’ve got it and never think of it, and, alas, if you do you do not have the wit to stay with it but hasten back by train or boat or plane into your own day and put it in a corner of your mind as an interesting trip. Do this often enough and you may occasionally wonder which world you really live in.

On some such grounds as these you should meet Zeshin. His works, if they appeared at
America House, would be a sensation—delightful anywhere. But it would be better if you would imagine yourself living in a country town and in a civilization where as a matter of course housekeeping set a standard that most Americans would be bound to find self-consciously exquisite. It was not so—it is not so with these people. In Japan it is a national standard that, however humble your house, it must be clean, comfortable, simple, and it must be beautiful. From palace to almost a beggar’s hut this seems to be a matter of course in Japan. It takes very little to do this once you get the idea. Even if you are very rich your living room will have a corner niche with just one picture, one vase of flowers, and a pretty object or two—a bowl or lacquer box—the best one you can get.

This was the environment that produced Zeshin. The word “artist” was unknown in old Japan. You painted pictures or you carved sculptures. You were either a painter of houses or pictures or a carver of wood or stone.

Zeshin was born in 1807 and at the age of ten was apprenticed to Koma Kwansai, a master of lacquer. He was first of all a lacquer craftsman. But he painted too and was a pupil of Nanrei of the Maruyama school and of Toyohiko of the Shijo schools.

Lacquer craftsman and amateur painter, he is given credit for inventing “lacquer paintings”—an obviously trick medium. If he did not invent them, at any rate he raised them to the importance of paintings. And we have both—his paintings in lacquer and those on silk or paper. In both he is perfection, but essentially a perfect “little” master. His technique, especially in lacquer, is superb. He is at his best when he records the beauty of little things—a ghostly dandelion seed floating across a black lacquer field or a gourd and a dandelion plant—small things so clearly seen that they take a place of their own and attract us to the perfection of small things. When he deals with animals or people or grand things like the setting sun he presents them with sympathy and understanding. Beautiful but small—if the Gulliver countries had had any human sweetness he could have been the top master of Lilliput. This is not in any way to disparage him. Zeshin paints the setting sun blood-red with wisps of clouds—no one could do it better—but the sun is alone. Does that make it more tremendous or does it reduce it to a tall postage stamp? Zeshin paints
ON THESE PAGES: A pair of six-panel screens by Zeshin. The figures are painted in color on a gold background. Fletcher Fund, 1951
The subject of the screens is the training of dancing girls. Opposite page, the pupils are dancing; above, they are drinking tea.
Kwannon, and the majestic deity becomes a cozy creature who might be presiding over a stall in a charity bazaar. There is no way of telling except from his works just what he intended, if we can guess from his works. Certainly what he recorded was delight in the humblest plants and flowers, a humorous understanding of animals and human beings, and an amiable philosophy which put the setting sun and the deity Kwannon in terms that the mind of a puppy could understand.

Here in New York we might never have been aware of Zeshin if our foremost collector of Japanese things, Howard Mansfield, had not been attracted to him more than fifty years ago. I don’t know how he discovered him except that they were what the Italians call simpatico. In a day when collectors went after “old masters” Mr. Mansfield collected Zeshin on the side. Zeshin died in 1891. Mr. Mansfield visited Japan in 1898. They almost met—in a way they did.

Zeshin is undoubtedly a genius and a master; what he did was perfect. He was not what we call grand, and he certainly never attempted to be grand, but perfection should not be overlooked in the sum of things—in the long run. Painters whom we consider little have their proper place. Titian and Michelangelo are different from Botticelli and Fra Angelico. The first no doubt gave visual expression to our deeper aspirations. Scale it as you please—it is a mind thing—each one of these did something better than anyone else. And so this Zeshin, master craftsman with an eye of genius for little things, was perfection.

The Metropolitan Museum is lucky. With the Mansfield collection it acquired an excellent group of his works, lacquer boxes, for which he was most famous, little books of
lacquer pictures (an oddity in the field of art akin to American samplers), a painting or two, little but lovely things. The Museum has added to this nucleus as luck has come our way, and we really have a collection to be envied.

We have, in fact, sixteen lacquer pieces of great variety. Zeshin delighted both in using simple designs and shapes and by legerdemain making lacquer look like old leather, or metal, or even a circular block of ink. The most elaborate of our boxes, a writing box decorated inside and out, at first seems too elaborate to be by Zeshin, but then we find it signed—made at the age of eighty and apparently just one more of his experiments.

We have eight hanging scrolls in ink and color. The subjects are diverse but painted with the seeming simplicity of a stanza by Emily Dickinson: the setting sun, naught else; three crows flying past a winter cliff; a rock, a bird, and an autumn vine; Mount Fuji snow-clad with a small village in the foreground; a glimpse of sailboats through trees; a very human Kwannon; the humorous, tall-skulled Jurojin, God of Longevity; and a congratulatory bundle of lucky tortoises bound with red cord.

There are three albums of lacquer paintings. Painting in lacquer is an extremely difficult technique—just two steps away from lacquer boxes, allowing a little more freedom. The painter is doing a stunt, but Zeshin made a stunt a work of art. His taste for simple things simply stated stood him in good stead. Page after page of these albums show us such subjects as a clump of cattails against the moon, butterflies, a furry badger, rice stacks, a chilly duck in chilly snow, a single morning-glory, and so on.
There is a fourth album, an album of fan paintings. Some of these are painted in lacquer, some in water color—an astonishment indeed. This is much larger, a series of fans in which every enchanting trick he did in lacquer boxes appears. There is also an album of sketches which contrasts with the lacquer albums in freedom of technique but is like them in subject matter.

We have one pair of six-panel screens. They are about four feet high and a little over nine feet long, not as large as the customary screen, not as small as a tea-ceremony screen. They depict a lot of little girls at dancing school, a pretty subject anywhere. It is, as Zeshin inscribes it, painted in the style of Matabei—the founder of the Ukiyoye school. But while the early Ukiyoe works, gorgeous and beautiful as they are, have a profound undercurrent often sad and bitter, the Zeshin version is lightsome and gay. This is not a connection in which one would think of Fra Angelico, but the same kind of vision of the world is expressing itself.

There is also a little screen of the size used for tea ceremonies. The subject is simple—two fans painted with elaborate delicacy to appear
simple. They are not simple at all. They are the height of artifice. One doubts if Okakura would have used it for a tea ceremony and after all we in the West start with Okakura's interpretation of the tea ceremony. The tea ceremony is a subject better let alone by me as it arouses my worst instincts. I take a little comfort in the fact that the younger Japanese, perhaps tainted with Western practicalities, have a gleam in the eye that leads me to suspect that they too are slightly rebellious. It is obvious that Zeshin had a sweetly humorous turn of mind—this exquisite little screen could easily be a delicious bit of fun at the expense of the tea ceremony. I do not say this is so—merely that it occurs to me as a possibility.

That is quite a lot. These are things you have to see for yourself. Photographs won't do—nor will descriptions. Just as birds and insects, we are told, have songs we cannot hear, Zeshin does tricks in paint and lacquer that one cannot convey even by enlargements.

It is like this. If you are in the country you may take pleasure in the look of a meadow with different grasses, so that you are aware when the wind ripples it that it flows—that one current of grasses may be yellow, another slightly rose, another faded green. You may go closer and sit down and watch the patch of meadow which looked from the veranda like a pleasing tapestry. You watch your patch and discover if you look more closely—at a different scale—that grass stalks become bamboos, the tiny insects birds or animals.

So Zeshin sees—so Zeshin paints. One of his pretty fans looks like the surface of things—looks flat and simple. Look closer and you will find a dandelion seed floating across the emptiness. Look closer still and you will find what looks like a flat background animated with wisps of something just as in a seeming clear blue sky you will find quite often wisps of cloud.

This man obviously took great pleasure in the natural world about him, and in his various crafts he has caught one little evanescent facet after another of it better than any painter I know.

The quotation at the beginning of this article is from Fancy, by John Keats.