KORIN AND THE IRIS SCREENS

By ALAN PRIEST
Curator of Far Eastern Art

One of the most famous pairs of screens in Japan are the iris screens by Korin (1661–1716) in the Nedzu collection in Tokyo. In 1939 the Japanese Government sent a pair of iris screens by Hoitsu (1761–1828), a much later painter, to an exhibition in Berlin. The catalogue informed the world that these were a copy by Hoitsu—not a copy exactly, a version by Hoitsu, who thought to improve upon the original by adding a small zigzag footbridge damp with rain or dew. All the time the original pair complete with footbridge had been hidden away and overlooked though published in sale catalogues as they passed from hand to hand.

All three pairs of screens are beautiful—beautiful beyond compare. In all three there is a spread of some twenty-four feet of diapered gold background applied in squares catching the light in broken pattern when it was first applied and increasing in variety with the years as the gold softened. The subject of all three pairs of screens is the same, clumps of iris pleasantly disposed and, in two pairs, with a diagonal zigzag footbridge. The footbridge is brown mulioned with damp. In all three the irises are of a deep and beautiful blue, the under petals gray blue, the stalks and leaves of clear green.

These things must have blazed like a circus wagon when they were first painted. They blaze still, but the gold has softened and the green, thickly laid on, has chipped off here and there, showing a tender undergreen perhaps more beautiful with the years than at the beginning.

The Hoitsu is later and definitely a copy or version of the Korin screens with the bridge. The clumps of iris and the bridge (once you are told) don’t quite catch up with the original—not quite so sharp the delineation, not quite so exciting the disposition of the clumps of iris.

Of the two Korin pairs which is better, that with the bridge or that without the bridge? Is not that mostly a matter of personal taste? Do you like your iris pool to seem a wild pool without man in it anywhere, or do you like it more accessible with a bridge?

I myself like the bridge. I think it makes the iris more interesting. There is of course a personal slant on this. To get close to wild iris in New England you often get your feet wet. To get close to water lilies you must either go by boat or risk drowning. Iris smell most delicate but very little, whereas water lilies (our American pond ones) smell most delicious and very strong—almost vulgar some would say.

Human beings are very offish about this particular one of their five recognized senses anyway. Except in advertisements for perfume, which we have wit enough to laugh about, smells are practically unmentionable. And great distinction is made between smells that are good and smells that are bad. But at the same time they (human beings) will smile with good temper, almost patronizing, at the animal world and even say how exciting their life must be. To an animal all smells are informative and interesting. They are to human beings also, but human beings won’t usually admit it.

These painted iris assault the eye. They do more. If you listen you can hear them. It is not that they are noisy, but so strongly do they reach your eye that for a moment they shut off our city sounds. They do more. I believe that even if you had never been outdoors in a garden or the wild woods they would inform you of the freshness of late May or June. They inform too of touch and taste.

This may seem to be forcing a good thing too far, but is it not possible that a great work of art—in this case a painting—which on the surface appeals to only the one sense (visual) has these other things hidden in it? Our iris screens appeal to the eye. Yes, but do they not remind you of all these other things?

I myself have never seen an iris in New York save in a florist’s window. But I must admit that I have been intimate with iris as long as I can
ON THESE PAGES: *Japanese screens representing an iris garden with a footbridge, by Ogata Korin (1661–1716). Louisa E. McBurney Gift Fund, 1953*
remember—iris in gardens, iris in wild places, and those stunted, dwarf ones growing around brackish wells in Turkestan.

So, then, these magnificent Japanese garden iris of course recall all these things. Supposing I had not had this experience of iris. Suppose I had never seen an iris. Suppose that iris were a new thing. Surely I would have been dumber-founded. Surely I would have been astonished.

Is it possible that great works of art do that for the innocent and ignorant? Has a great work of art—we use such terms—a power of communication of its own? I think so. Many survive through the centuries. They have a life of their own which we do not as yet understand—we do not understand, but we have just sense enough to have museums in which to protect and preserve them.

Korin was the most famous of a famous school of decorative painters which came into being in the early seventeenth century in Kyoto. It would be better to call it a group of painters than a school because the members of it were very loosely associated, and all were individuals. The great names in this group were Koyetsu, Sotatsu, and Korin. As historical criticism changes first one and then another is considered the leader of the group. Just now we hear a great deal about Sotatsu. In their day they were a new thing.

In Japanese painting there are two main traditions of decoration, the one with elaborate all-over composition against a gold background, usually found in palaces and the houses of the rich, the other a poetic monochrome in the Chinese manner and usually found in temples. These traditions have persisted until the present day, but new things came up in the seventeenth century. We are best acquainted with the thing called Ukiyoe—"Pictures of the Floating World"—out of which came the Japanese prints.

The capital moved from Kyoto to Tokyo—Tokyo was the simmering center of innovation. The capital might move, but Kyoto then and Kyoto now was and is with quiet assurance the heart and soul of Japanese culture—a good bit like Boston in this country.

Unlike the Ukiyoe painters Korin and his associates breaking with tradition raised no scandal at all, and it was scarce noticed, as far as one can find in the books, that they had created a revolution of their own. The Ukiyoe dealt with people—all sorts of people, mostly considered unaristocratic. The Koyetsu-Korin school dealt with flowers and birds in a no less revolutionary fashion, but it is very hard to make flowers and birds a historical or political issue and they have quite properly escaped criticism in this matter.

And after all what did they do? Very little except to simplify, to cut down masses of chrysanthemum or peony gardens to the stark selection of a few—fewer flowers, fewer birds—the very thing that today we think is the whole secret of Japanese painting.