TOMIOKA TESSAI

BY BISHOP KOJO SAKAMOTO
Abbot of Kiyoshi Kojin Seicho Temple

This article has been reprinted from the catalogue of the current loan exhibition Tomioka Tessai, Japanese Painter Poet, circulated by the Traveling Exhibition Service of the Smithsonian Institution.

At last, through the combined efforts of various persons and organizations in America and Japan, the works of the great Japanese-born artist Tomioka Tessai are to be exhibited in several important U. S. cities, and so will be offered for the first time for the appreciation of the general public in America. This ultimate realization of my long-cherished desire gives me a happiness beyond measure. On this occasion, I should like to speak briefly about the motives which led me to collect these works, and about my association with Tessai.

Forty-three years ago, when I became Bishop of this Temple, not a single work of Tessai was owned by the Temple, and the name of Tessai was not widely known. About that time, I was told by one of our believers, “Anyone who decides to collect painting and calligraphy mustn’t pay attention simply to the technical gifts of the man who made them; unless the artist is himself deserving of respect for his character and attitude to life, his works will have no value for the future. Tessai is the foremost man of character in the field of painting today, and is also a scholar of rare insight. He will surely, in years to come, be venerated by all the world.” My concern with Tessai arose at that moment. I seized every opportunity to see his works wherever I could, studied them diligently, and began to collect them carefully one by one.

Just at that time, plans were going forward for the development of Takarazuka, near our Temple, as an amusement center, with an operetta company to be established there. The field of entertainment being thus represented, I determined then to complete the three spheres of human culture by making our mountain into a shrine of art as well as a sanctuary of the faith, and devoted the intervals between my daily religious duties to the absorbing task of studying and collecting works of Tessai.

I first visited Tessai and was introduced to him.

ABOVE: One of a pair of screens with paintings of Mount Fuji, by Tomioka Tessai (1876-1924), in the Museum’s current exhibition of paintings by this artist lent by the Seicho Temple in Japan.
when the old man was eighty-seven. He received me delightedly, and after a keen examination of the pictures I had brought, raised his youthful face and said, “They’re mine!” I felt, at that moment, an unspeakable affection for him. After this I visited him often, to request authentications of my purchases or to watch him at work. The first picture he painted especially for me was the “Three ‘Old Buddhas’ in a Shrine.” By then I had already gathered several hundreds of his paintings, and he was pleased that I had collected his own work exclusively; he wrote in a letter, “You apply your lofty vision only to my clumsy brushwork” and also said, “I shall paint for you with all my energy.”

Once he said, “People are always coming to me boasting of their calligraphy. All of them write very well, but none so well as I do. If only Kobo Daishi were still alive, the two of us would have a real ‘meeting of minds’ about calligraphy!” I was struck with admiration for his matchless discernment.

On the whole, the old man was not given to boasting about his works; but when I was presented with the pictures of “Kobo Daishi’s Travels in China” and “The Sixteen Arhats Watching a Game of Go in a Cave,” there was a note attached to them reading, “Although they might still be called ‘free and easy;’ I’ve done them with special consideration and restraint, and they aren’t like my ordinary works . . .”

When he was eighty-eight he announced that he was coming to our Temple, and we made elaborate preparations to receive him; but because of his advanced age, he decided in the end against coming, lest some unlikely accident happen on the way. When I went to him instead and asked him for a picture, he consented readily, saying, “Good! I’ll draw some” and presented me with a number of superb works.

He was always saying, “I want people to read and understand the inscriptions on my pictures.” His inscriptions are all aimed at the enlightenment and education of the people of the world, and are filled with a rich spirit of humanism. That one never tires of them, loving them more the more one sees them, is because they are, like his paintings and calligraphy, direct expressions of his personal character and beliefs. For, besides

Tessai’s version of the Ten Bullock Pictures which, in the Zen sect of Buddhism, symbolize the steps toward spiritual enlightenment. Tessai has here combined the scenes representing the traditional ten stages in the pursuit and capture of a strayed bullock.
A Pleasant Life in a Gourd and A Dialogue between Sages, two paintings by Tessai
Monkeys Reaching for the Moon in Water and Three Old Men Tasting Vinegar, by Tessai
being an artist and scholar of the first rank, Tessai was a man of spiritual faith. The value of this aspect of his art for people of other lands is symbolized by his painting of "The Patriarchs of Religions Boating Together," in which the spiritual teachers of the world are represented together, embarking harmoniously in a single boat.

Thus my friendship with the Master became ever deeper. He approached the spring of his ninetieth year with increasing vigor; then, on the last day of the last month of the year, he departed for another world, ending gladly his long and peaceful mortal life. Until the end, his brushwork did not decline, but rather manifested an energy which seemed to transcend human bounds. His death was all the more to be regretted.

The day before this profound sorrow, I received, with feelings of surprise and pleasure, the following letter from Tessai:

"Because of the year-end, I have been kept busy with affairs both scholarly and worldly. The richness of the affection shown me by you, my revered teacher, fills me with deep emotion. . . . I haven't sent you a letter of thanks for each of the gifts you have so kindly sent me, and I feel ashamed of my remissness. Some day I must speak my gratitude to you from the darkness of the afterlife; for now, in this world, my thankfulness is beyond words. I pray that next spring I will receive generously once again of your wisdom. With respectful obeisance, the 28th day of the twelfth month."

This letter was written only three days before his death, and I was deeply moved by its expression of kindness, of courtesy, and of a seeming foreknowledge that he was to take leave of this life.

Since then I have found deep pleasure in the strange affinity which bound me to the venerable Tessai, and with sincere feelings of eternal gratitude I have taken the exalting of the man and

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_A Snow Scene in Morning Sunlight, by Tessai_
The legendary Realm of Immortals in the Eastern Sea, as represented by Tessai
his works as my heart’s desire. I have already held a number of exhibitions of his paintings within Japan, and also presented over forty of them as gifts to museums abroad. This was for no other purpose than to promote among the nations of the world belief in the Japanese people. Now at last, through a fortunate congruence of time and persons, I come to see my long-cherished desire about to be fulfilled, in sending forth the works of our great master Tessai to be exhibited in the artistic world, and thus to contribute to international goodwill, the interchange of culture, and ultimately to world peace—for it is my sincere belief that the spirit and ideals of Tessai, as implicit in all his works, were these but understood by men everywhere, would act as a very real force in that great cause.

There is nothing I long for beyond this; I send my respectful thanks to the Heaven of Buddha for its protection, and have here set forth my desires as a greeting to all who see this exhibition.

The exhibition of Tessai’s paintings was made possible by the good offices of the Asia Foundation; Nagakage Okabe, President of the Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai (The Society for International Cultural Relations); the Reverend Bishop Kojo Sakamoto; and James Cahill of the Freer Gallery of Art.

Tomioka Tessai in his study