

The Art of the East

THE SPIRIT OF MAN IN ASIAN ART.
By Laurence Binyon. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1935. \$4.

Reviewed by LOUIS V. LEDOUX

IN all that he does Mr. Laurence Binyon remains a poet. His new book is filled with flashes of interpretation, and the reader cannot fail to be impressed by the extraordinary variety and richness of his mind. One does not go to him primarily for scholarship or technical discussion, but for something superior to these where a work of art is concerned—the imaginative insight and sensitiveness of a great appreciator. It takes two to make a poem—the writer and the reader; it takes two to make a picture or a statue live. In a spiritual sense such appreciation as Mr. Binyon gives is almost equivalent to re-creation; and for the rest of us who are less endowed than he, companionship with him is as delightful as it is useful. What he writes frequently is suffused with emotion, but the style never is overburdened and remains perfect in lucidity as well as in tonal quality even when the thought it expresses is abstruse. He is a master of English prose.

"The Spirit of Man in Asian Art" does not pretend to be a history of the art of the Far East. Its purpose, which is clearly stated and consistently carried out, is

to show how the spirit of man, whether in China or India, Persia or Japan, has expressed through creative art its relation to the world and to the universe; to suggest the likenesses and contrasts between these arts and the arts of Western countries, the reactions of the arts of the various races of Asia on each other, and the specific virtue in the contribution of each of them to the whole.

To accomplish his aim Mr. Binyon tries to make clear the fundamental racial characteristics that distinguish the expressions in art of the different Asian stocks, and one of the virtues of the book is the peculiar clarity with which this difficult task is carried out. The art of Asia is a unit as compared with the art of the Occident, as in a still broader view the art of the world is one; but there are differences based in racial characteristics in the Orient just as there are in the West where Umbrian painting, for example, differs from that of the Netherlands even though the fountain head of all Occidental art is in Greece, as the center, though not the origin, of all Oriental art is in China. It is better, however, to let Mr. Binyon speak for himself.

While discussing the wall-paintings at Bagh, in India, he drops, quite casually, the following illuminating sentences:

Above all, there is a perfect fusion of the sensuous and the spiritual. The spiritual significance of life is not emphasized so as to become disdainful of the lovely body and the warm earth; it is felt rather as something which pervades and perfumes all that breathes, like the light touch of wind blowing from we know not where; something which unites and does not divide.

There, in a few brief phrases, is the es-

sence of much of the art of India, and attention must be called once more to the lucidity of the simple and lovely prose in which an abstruse and difficult summary is conveyed. Of China, Mr. Binyon writes, while speaking of the Ming tombs and the quiet valley in which they lie:

The mind . . . has discovered a harmony between its own life and the life of nature; there is a flowing out and a flowing in. Here is the keynote of the creative art of China.

And again on a later page:

The attitude of Lao-tzu seems to have much in common with the Indian attitude, yet it is, I think, more accessible to our ways of thinking. Indian art and poetry are full of delight in the beauties of this world, because in each glory of sound and sight and smell is



KRISHNA DANCING ON THE
CONQUERED SERPENT.

East Indian bronze, reproduced from
"Mythologie Générale" (Larousse).

found a manifestation of the joy of the Infinite Spirit. But with all that sensitiveness to nature there is no passionate study of nature as a whole. There is no development of pure landscape art, as in China, where there is a deep and abiding sense of the companionship of earth and man. The habit of regarding the world of appearances as illusory is too strong. . . .

Still further on in the Chinese section of the book the author adds:

If the artists crave for the companionship of hills and streams, it is because they are convinced that in such companionship the true life of man is to be found. It is an escape not from life, but to life. Therefore these paintings are mostly serene and exhilarating.

The limits imposed on this review forbid equal quotation as to the art of Persia, which in any case is rather a parallel river than an affluent of the main stream of Asian art, which flowed from India through China to Japan gaining new aspects in its course like the river in Matthew Arnold's poem; but the racial traits of the Japanese and the distinguishing characteristics of their art are so incisively put that it seems necessary to quote at some length what Mr. Binyon says of them. In one place he is speaking of a garden designed by Soami—a strange garden to Western eyes, flowerless, shrubless, waterless, nothing but an expanse of raked white sand with a few rocks; and after describing it as the ultimate expression of Zen thought he adds, like one turning on a sudden light in a dark room:

I should like to dwell for a moment on this propensity to carry things to extremity, to sacrifice everything else to the chosen aim, which I think is characteristic of the race and which sometimes will appear to us almost fantastic, almost terrifying.

Okakura has observed that the strong element of common sense in the Chinese nature has prevented the Chinese from carrying things to extremes in the world of ideas and the world of action. In this respect, he says, the Japanese are much nearer to the Indians. . . .

There is a sort of absolute quality in the Japanese loyalty to a cause or an idea. Probably in the history of the world there has never been a race so heroic, I mean so possessed by the spirit which is ready to dare all and endure all, regardless of consequence, in the cause which it has chosen. Though this spirit is manifested most strikingly in the world of action, it is present also in the world of ideas, and in art. In Japanese art we are to look for no careless creative profusion, no copious magnificence; it is rather a fine distillation, a concentration of aim exerted in the direction of a fastidious delicacy of taste.

Much more could be said about this book than has been said. It contributes little or nothing not previously known to specialists, and for an audience of non-specialists such as that to which its contents were delivered as lectures last year at Harvard, it may presuppose too much. What it gives in a sort of fusion of intellect and emotion and merely sensuous appreciation, is the reaction of a peculiarly endowed Occidental observer to the art of the East and an explanation partly brought out by comparison with and distinction from the art of the West, of how the human spirit in the countries under consideration has expressed the gropings, the uncertainties, the aspirations of the soul of man in its relations to the universe.

There are points of scholarship with which one might venture to disagree, as for example, the statement that the vitality of the animal forms in Early Chinese bronzes seldom degenerated in later times into formalism. These, however, are very minor points against a volume that should stimulate a person who already knows something of Eastern art almost as much as it would one who enters for the first time through its door of enchantment.

Louis V. Ledoux is president of the Society for Japanese Studies.

America's First Man of Letters

THE LIFE OF WASHINGTON IRVING.
By Stanley T. Williams. New York:
Oxford University Press. 1935. 2 vols.
\$15.

Reviewed by ROBERT E. SPILLER

THIS is perhaps the least hurried book to issue this fall. Its two stout volumes, to be followed by a bibliographical third, have been in preparation for the past ten years, and it emerges as the definitive life of America's first man of letters. What is more, it makes entertaining reading, evidence that the demands of the specialist and of the public are not so far apart as is sometimes assumed.

Irving presents an interesting conflict of literary standards. Intrinsically, his work is on a par with that of such English contemporaries as Scott, Moore, Campbell, and perhaps even lesser men, and he cannot be thought of in the same breath with Shelley, Lamb, or Wordsworth. But historically it marks the beginning of our national literature. In the one sense, he is an author of secondary value, one of the lesser stars in the constellation of the English romantic movement, influencing his age by personal charm as much as by literary genius; in the other, he is our Chaucer, the first American writer to carve out even a modest place in world literature.

Mr. Williams's approach to his problem takes these conflicting facts into consideration, and his treatment of it never for a moment loses the perspective thus gained. The personality of Irving has been presented to us clearly by his nephew, Pierre, and by later biographers, notably George S. Hellman. But in all of these portraits, particularly in the first, the charm of the man has led to over-sympathetic appreciation, to confusion of sentiment with worth, or to rather violent spells of disillusionment. Pierre tells us that the memory of Matilda Hoffman followed Irving through life, kept him a bachelor, and furnished the chief inspiration of his work. Mr. Hellman reveals the suppressed romance with Emily Foster and shatters our sentimental dream. But Mr. Williams demonstrates that, in spirit, Pierre was right. Matilda was the source of the charm in all other women, for at the very moment when Irving's dependence on the Fosters was greatest, he scrawled in the margin of his note-book, "I see her in their eyes." He had all the sentimentality of his age.

In a subtle and unobtrusive way, we

are made to feel in this new biography that here we have found the key to his character. "Moore was inclined to scold him," says Mr. Williams, "because, when introduced as a lion, he so quickly took on the guise of the lamb. . . . On the world of social thought or, indeed, on those of character or passion or criticism, this observer of externals was silent." His merit for his time lay in his "gentle" character, the quality which so annoyed Lamb when it was rightly applied to himself, but which Irving justified by acceptance. He was one with his essays.

A franker and harsher age has tended to shelve such relics of bygone sentimentality as Geoffrey Crayon, and Irving has suffered. The divorce of the charming man of society from the graceful essayist was no mean critical task, if the latter were to survive the operation. Most of Irving's work goes into the discard in the process, but a half dozen of the "Sketch Book" essays "live on the speech of men" and "it is their literary quality which has caused them to survive." The theme of mutability, celebrated by Shakespeare, Spenser, and Keats with deeper wisdom, finds an original expression once more in the hands of this proficient and trained writer of familiar prose. Similarly, Irving's humor and his antiquarian sensibilities survive as purely literary values in other works.

But this biography is more than a discerning character portrayal and critical analysis. "Curious," writes Mr. Williams, "how the allegiance of 'The Sketch Book' to established English canons proved to be a hook with two barbs, catching both American and British publics." In spite of his long residence abroad and his study of English models, the roots of Irving's art were deep in the America of the day, a nation emergent. The adolescent conflict between egotism and dependence which all American literature of the period expresses, found in him a soothing synthesis; in Cooper and Paulding a disrupting analysis. Furthermore, as Mr. Williams points out, the literary standards of the era "intermingled the aims of art, morality, politics, and business." Such incongruities gave rise to a widespread demand that America suddenly create a literature of her own, free of foreign dominance, and expressive of the whole American consciousness. Irving was a god-sent answer to the prayer. In the suavity of his prose, his compatriots found the expression of their bourgeois and nationalistic hopes, with the barbs of inconsistency carefully removed. He could at once be the spokesman of his nation abroad and a respectable essayist in the English literary tradition. His importance in giving our national literature its first real start is therefore immense, and the study of his life and work provides insight into the ideals and mental habits of his age and people. With the biographical, historical, and critical aspects of his work done so thoroughly, we may look forward to the bibliographical volume with confidence. The whole must always be a model for American literary scholarship.

Robert E. Spiller is a member of the department of English of Swarthmore College and author of a number of works on American literature.


Gascon Adventurer

EPERNON OF OLD FRANCE. By Leo Mouton. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1935. \$3.

Reviewed by GARRETT MATTINGLY

BEGINNING as it does with the death of Henri III this brief biography omits the most unsavory but the most entertaining and instructive part of the duke of Epemon's career, the rise of the penniless Gascon adventurer who, emerging from the crowd of worthless favorites about the last wretched Valois, thrust his way by sheer effrontery and concentrated egotism to the position of one of the wealthiest and most powerful noblemen of France. No place in the kingdom, short of the throne itself, was too high for his fiercely self-centered ambition to covet, no personal advantage too petty to arouse his game-cock pugnacity. He never, in a half century of furious activity after the death of Henri III, quite succeeded in making history, perhaps because he was never able to imagine the necessity of serving any interests but his own. Not even Richelieu ruined him and he died in 1641 at the age of eighty-seven still a great nobleman, his colossal impudence unbroken to the last. His biographer was perhaps wise in choosing largely incidents from the closing years of Epemon's career.

There are many good stories in this short volume, particularly that of Epemon's absurd feud with the archbishop of Bourdeaux, and many hair-raising adventures, but though the costumes are cloaks and swords there was nothing of M. Beaucaire about Epemon and little even of D'Artagnan. His portrait is rather a reminder that self-made magnates are apt to be a good deal alike whether the stakes are dukedoms or railroads.



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