

# THE JAPAN MAGAZINE

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JAPANESE WAR PAINTER

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# **JAPANESE WAR PAINTER**

By T. KOSHIBA

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BATTLE OF  
DAN-NO-URA



BATTLE OF  
KAWANAKAJIMA





YOSHITSUNE



BENKEI



BATTLE OF KAWANAKAJIME



TOMOYE GOZEN

## JAPANESE WAR PAINTER

By T. KOSHIBA

ONE of the most noted painters of war scenes that ever appeared among Japanese artists was Kuniyoshi, who served his apprenticeship in the handling of the brush under the famous Utagawa Toyokuni. Kuniyoshi was the son of a dyer in the Kanda district of Tokyo, and was born in the year 1797 when the shogun's capital was called Yedo. At the age of twelve years the boy displayed a remarkable talent for painting, and entered the studio of Toyokuni. In his early career the young artist was so poor that he had to hawk things about for sale in order to make ends meet; and on one of these expeditions he chanced to meet a class-mate of his, named Kurisada, who afterwards also became a noted master of the brush. Kunisada was chatting with a sweetheart of his; and Kuniyoshi was much ashamed to have them see him carrying about things to sell, and so in a fit of mortification he threw his pack into the river and returned to his lodgings.

From that time he made up his mind that only by hard work and incessant industry could he rise to a position of independence. At first he sought to develop skill in the portraiture of beautiful women, as Kunisada did; but his hand was too brusque for so delicate a task. His beauties were not a success. They showed considerable art, however, and led him on to greater triumphs.

In the year 1818 Kuniyoshi tried his hand at a ghost scene of the famous hero Taira-no-Tomonori, and published it as a colour print. The picture found instant popularity and the artist at once became famous, the hero of the painting was killed, it will, be remembered, at the battle of the clans, by Minamoto-no-Yoshitsune; and the picture represented the ghost of the fallen hero appearing to his slayer, Yoshitsune, as the latter was crossing the Inland Sea a year later.

Having tasted the sweets of success Kuniyoshi continued to follow it up with further colour prints, mostly of famous warriors, or other military heroes. His companion, Kunisada, continued to produce pictures of famous beauties and actors, the two subjects running suspiciously together. Each of these artists in his own sphere displayed extraordinary technique and perfection; and yet the contrast between them was very great, Kunisada was regarded as the abler artist, however, because his themes lent themselves to livelier treatment, while those of Kuniyoshi were solitary and cheerless. In spite of the less popular theme, the paintings of Kuniyoshi continued to find favour with the more patriotic citizens of country, and gradually his circumstances became more easy and independent.

Kuniyoshi and Kunisada were in character also a remarkable contrast to each other. Kunisada behaved with great dignity, and carried himself like a noble. He dressed himself in the best style and was clever at making and saving money, Kuniyoshi, on the other hand, was a plain and simple man, inclined to be content with enough money to get on with. His dress was of the simplest and he cared not to hoard money. Thus the one apeed the upper classes while the other was satisfied to be one of common people.

Kuniyoshi's fame reached its height on his completion of the colour prints for the famous Chinese novel, *Suiko-den*, involving 108 paintings, marvellously well done. In 1853 an incident occurred that reveals the frank hearted spirit of the famous painter. An exhibition of paintings was held at a certain restaurant; and Kuniyoshi, in an excess of mirth on the occasion, took off one of his thinner garments, soaked it in ink and used it as a brush, portraying in a few swift, bold strokes such famous warriors as Kumonryu and Rochishin from the Chinese novel already mentioned. The picture represented the two fierce fighters in a deadly contest with each other. It was drawn on a piece of paper 30 feet square laid on a *tatami* floor of seventy mats. The delineation of the contestants, gradually developing into a struggle like great dragons emerging out of clouds, was imposing in the extreme and greatly impressed those who witnessed the achievement.

One of the most distinguished of the works of Kuniyoshi is a picture of Emma-o in the temple of Kwannon at Asakusa. One of the features of this, as of all his art, is the remarkable attention to details, notably in regard to dress and decoration, showing, it is suggested, a family influence, his father having been a dyer. The artist was wonderfully expert in the mixing of colours as well as in the handling of them to consummate effect in his art.

About the year 1843 Kuniyoshi painted a representation of Minamoto-no-Yorimitsu suffering from

being taken possession of by the spirit of a *Tsuchigumo*, or Earthspider, this being the name given to the aboriginal tribes inhabiting the islands of Japan. The picture was taken as slur on the politics of the day; and the artist was condemned to penalties, the block from which the famous print was done being confiscated by the authorities. One could hardly fail to understand the significance of the painting; for it plainly suggested that the 12th shogun, Iyehisa, was like Minamoto-no-Yorimitsu; and that the Prime Minister of the time, Mizuno Echizen-no-kami, as a *Tsuchigumo*, was about to possess him like a low spirit.

The truthful humour of such an effort delightfully brings out the real Yedo characteristics of the artist; fond of jokes, and jibes, and indirect ways of presenting home truths. As the Tokugawa shogunate began to decline the artist naturally rejoiced and took advantage of the situation to subject the shogunate to merciless caricature.

It is obvious that the manner and style of Kuniyoshi blend those of the older artists of Japan in a remarkable degree. The style of Katsukawa Shunyei, whom Kuniyoshi first admired, clung to him far beyond the years of his apprenticeship ; and when he came under the magic influence of Toyokuni, his real master, Kuniyoshi blended his former manner with the new and more finished merit of his teacher. Even the virtues of his colleagues in the studio he did not fail to profit by, and in his work one can detect reflections of Kunisada and Hokusai and even of western artists. This is seen more especially in his attention to accuracy of colouring and of the laws of perspective.

These latter merits were of special advantage to him in the impressive depiction of battle scenes which he strove to execute, as well as in his painting of warriors. One of his most noted war masterpieces is the Battle of Kawanaka-jima ; and he painted other famous fights of the Genpei age. The authorities of the shogun's government prohibited artists depicting scenes from the age in which they had striven to exterminate the Toyotomi family, as such remorseless behaviour was not likely to make the Government more popular. To obviate the difficulty Kuniyoshi used to depict all the horrors of the prohibited period by describing them as belonging to the Genpei era, or the Kamakura age, or the time of the Northern and Southern strife; but the public knew well what scenes they represented and took the hint accordingly.

In his later years Kuniyoshi suffered from palsy and could not hold a steady brush ; and thus he had to abandon the art which he loved. He passed away in the year 1861 at the age of sixty five.

Among the more distinguished of Kuniyoshi's pupils was Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, Nagashima Yoshitora and Ochiai Yoshiiku ; and of these Yoshitoshi is regarded as first, being skilled in the depiction of war scenes, like his master. But he is scarcely less distinguished as a painter of fair ladies during the Meiji era. His manner, however, was not perfectly after the art of his master; he was too eccentric for that, and some of his efforts are rather too stiff to be pleasing, the figures looking so much like engravings and their dresses like paper. It was a manner that became popular, nevertheless. Yoshitoshi did a great deal of work, too, as a newspaper illustrator, and he published numerous colour prints as well. He died in 1892.

Yoshitora confined himself especially to warriors, in which he excelled even his master; but he did not reveal the skill of his master in dealing with other themes. Yoshiiku devoted his time to the



depiction of famous beauties, and his achievements in this direction quite approached the skill of Kunisada. Mizuno Toshikata, a pupil of Yoshitoshi, won fame, too, as a painter of dignified pictures free from the vulgarity of the gem 6 pieces, and left behind him a worthy disciple in the person of Kaburaki Kiyokata who annually takes first place at the official exhibitions of Fine Art.

The school of paintings and colour prints started by Kuniyoshi is still prosperous, and the work of the artists of this school finds ready sale abroad, being appreciated for their genuine depiction of the manners and habits of the Tokugawa period. The same may be said of the gem 6 pictures of the Kunisada school, which are also deservedly popular with admirers of clever colour prints.