Impressions of Japan

YOU ASK me for my impressions about Japan. To write on Japan is a difficult task; so many things have been already written, so many silly things also... but these more on the people than on their country. For the country is so wonderful, picturesque, many-sided, unexpected, charming, wild or sweet; it is in its appearance so much a synthesis of all the other countries of the world, from the tropical to the arctic, that no artistic eye can remain indifferent to it. I believe many excellent descriptions have been given of Japan; I shall not then attempt to add mine, which would certainly be far less interesting. But the people of Japan have, in general, been misunderstood and misinterpreted, and on that subject something worth saying remains to be said.

In most cases foreigners come in touch with that part of the Japanese people which has been spoiled by foreigners,—a Japan of money-makers and imitators of the West; obviously they have proved very clever imitators, and you can easily find here a great many of those things which make the West hateful. If we judge Japan by her statesmen, her politicians and her businessmen, we shall find her a country very much like one of the Powers of Europe, though she possesses the vitality and concentrated energies of a nation which has not yet reached its zenith.

That energy is one of the most interesting features of Japan. It is visible everywhere, in everyone; the old and the young, the workmen, the women, the children, the students, all, save perhaps the “new rich”, display in their daily life the most wonderful storage of concentrated energy. With their perfect love for nature and beauty, this accumulated strength is, perhaps, the most distinctive and widely spread characteristic of the Japanese. That is what you may observe as soon as you reach that land of
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the Rising Sun where so many people and so many treasures are gathered in a narrow island.

But if you have — as we have had — the privilege of coming in contact with the true Japanese, those who kept untouched the righteousness and bravery of the ancient Samurai, then you can understand what in truth is Japan, you can seize the secret of her force. They know how to remain silent; and though they are possessed of the most acute sensitiveness, they are, among the people I have met, those who express it the least. A friend here can give his life with the greatest simplicity to save yours, though he never told you before he loved you in such a profound and unselfish way. Indeed he had not even told you that he had loved you at all. And if you were not able to read the heart behind the appearances, you would have seen only a very exquisite courtesy which leaves little room for the expression of spontaneous feelings. Nevertheless the feelings are there, all the stronger perhaps because of the lack of outward manifestation; and if an opportunity presents itself, through an act, very modest and veiled sometimes, you suddenly discover depths of affection.

This is specifically Japanese; among the nations of the world, the true Japanese — those who have not become westernised — are perhaps the least selfish. And this unselfishness is not the privilege of the well-educated, the learned or the religious people; in all social ranks you may find it. For here, with the exception of some popular and exceedingly pretty festivals, religion is not a rite or a cult, it is a daily life of abnegation, obedience, self-sacrifice.

The Japanese are taught from their infancy that life is duty and not pleasure. They accept that duty — so often hard and painful — with passive submission. They are not tormented by the idea of making themselves happy. It gives to the life of the whole country a very remarkable self-constraint, but no joyful and free expansion; it creates an atmosphere of tension and effort, of mental and nervous strain, not of spiritual peace like that which can be felt in India, for instance. Indeed, nothing in
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Japan can be compared to the pure divine atmosphere which pervades India and makes of her such a unique and precious country; not even in the temples and the sacred monasteries always so wonderfully situated, sometimes on the summit of a high mountain covered with huge cedar trees, difficult to reach, far from the world below.... Exterior calm, rest and silence are there, but not that blissful sense of the infinite which comes from a living nearness to the Unique. True, here all speaks to the eyes and mind of unity — unity of God with man, unity of man with Nature, unity of man with man. But this unity is very little felt and lived. Certainly the Japanese have a highly developed sense of generous hospitality, reciprocal help, mutual support; but in their feelings, their thoughts, their actions in general, they are among the most individualist, the most separatist people. For them the form is predominant, the form is attractive. It is suggestive too, it speaks of some deeper harmony or truth, of some law of nature or life. Each form, each act is symbolical, from the arrangement of the gardens and the houses to the famous tea ceremony. And sometimes in a very simple and usual thing you discover a symbol, deep, elaborated, willed, that most of the people know and understand; but it is an exterior and learnt knowledge — a tradition, it is not living truth coming from the depth of spiritual experience, enlightening heart and mind. Japan is essentially the country of sensations; she lives through her eyes. Beauty rules over her as an uncontested master; and all her atmosphere incites to mental and vital activity, study, observation, progress, effort, not to silent and blissful contemplation. But behind this activity stands a high aspiration which the future of her people will reveal.

9 July 1917