

W.M. Rossetti's 'Hoxai' [Hokusai]

It is a well-known fact that D.G. Rossetti, as one of the earliest British admirers of Japanese Art, was competing with James M. Whistler in collecting 'blue and white' china and Japanese prints from the early 1860s. He even portrayed some Japanese objects in his own paintings; in *The Blue Bower* (1865)¹ we see Fanny Cornforth playing the Japanese musical instrument 'koto' against the blue hexagonal tiles decorated with flowering plum-trees. The same instrument is also found in *A Sea Spell* (1872);² the temptress being unaware of how to play it correctly, though. Furthermore, the bride in *The Beloved* (1865-66)³ wears a green Japanese *kimono* of mapleleaf pattern, which Rossetti had borrowed from George Price Boyce.⁴

To assess the Japanese influence on the work of D.G. Rossetti we should, first of all, identify the original Japanese works and objects that might have been accessible to him at the time. Yet the standard biographical sources merely tell us that he had a passion for Japanese Art, without going into details. More specific information can be gleaned from contemporaneous diaries and letters. What follows is a collocation of such evidence.

W.M. Rossetti, Dante Gabriel's brother, writes in his diary:⁵

Went to Dessoye's, the Japanese shop in the Rue de Rivoli, and bought books etc. to the amount of 40 francs. They are cheaper here than in the Lepelletier. There is to be a new consignment in October, especially of books of birds and flowers. . . (June 18, 1864)

From D.G. Rossetti's letter of 12 November 1864 to his mother we learn that he too went to the shop described by William Michael in his diary:

I have bought very little—only four Japanese books, (. . .). I went to his Japanese shop, but found that all the

costumes were being snapped up by a French artist, Tissot, who it seems is doing three Japanese pictures, which the mistress of the shop described to me as the three wonders of the world, evidently in her opinion quite throwing Whistler into shade. She told me, with a great deal of laughing, about Whistler's consternation at my collection of china.⁶

The following year W.M. Rossetti again called at Mme de Soye's shop and in his diary⁷ named the author of the books he bought:

Went to Dessoye's Japanese shop, and bought the four pieces of brodered silk for Mrs. Dalrymple, along with two Hokusai books and two bits of leather-paper for myself. (May 24, 1865)

It is of considerable interest to learn that Hokusai's name was familiar to a small number of enthusiasts in London and Paris as early as 1865.

Just a month later, on 24 June 1865, W.M. Rossetti visited the Japanese shop at 7 Boulevard des Capucines in Paris on his way home from Italy and bought "a fair number of the small engravings on crape."⁸

We also learn from letters and diaries that the Rossettis bought a variety of *objets d'art* at Parisian shops. Although they might well have seen and bought similar objects at such London shops as Farmer and Roger's Oriental Warehouse (predecessor of Liberty & Co.),⁹ we lack any documentation identifying those objects.

In a letter of J. Ruskin¹⁰ to W.M. Rossetti, reference is made to a book of uncoloured Japanese landscapes:

The book is delightful, and thank you much for sending it. I should like to go and live in Japan. (. . .). I return Japan by book-post. The seas and clouds are delicious, the mountain very good. (June 15, 1863)