The art of Japan has none but an exterior part in the history of the art of nations. Being in its own methods and attitude the art of accident, it has, appropriately, an accidental value. It is of accidental value, and not of integral necessity. The virtual discovery of Japanese art, during the later years of the second French Empire, caused Europe to relearn how expedient, how delicate, and how lovely Incident may look when Symmetry has grown vulgar. The lesson was most welcome. Japan has had her full influence. European art has learnt the value of position and the tact of the unique. But Japan is unlessoned, and (in all her characteristic art) content with her own conventions; she is local, provincial, alien, remote, incapable of equal companionship with a world that has Greek art in its own history--Pericles "to its father."

Nor is it pictorial art, or decorative art only, that has been touched by Japanese example of Incident and the Unique. Music had attained the noblest form of symmetry in the eighteenth century, but in music, too, symmetry had since grown dull; and momentary music, the music of phase and of fragment, succeeded. The sense of symmetry is strong in a complete melody--of symmetry in its most delicate and lively and least stationary form--balance; whereas the _leit-motif_ is isolated. In domestic architecture Symmetry and Incident make a familiar antithesis--the very commonplace of rival methods of art. But the same antithesis exists in less obvious forms. The poets have sought "irregular" metres. Incident hovers, in the very act of choosing its right place, in the most modern of modern portraits. In these we have, if not the Japanese suppression of minor emphasis, certainly the Japanese exaggeration of major emphasis; and with this a quickness and buoyancy. The smile, the figure, the drapery--not yet settled from the arranging touch of a hand, and showing its mark--the restless and unstationary foot, and the unity of impulse that has passed everywhere like a single breeze, all these have a life that greatly transcends the life of Japanese art, yet has the nimble touch of Japanese incident. In passing, a charming comparison may be made between such portraiture and the aspect of an aspen or other tree of light and liberal leaf; whether still or in motion the aspen and the free-leafed poplar have the alertness and expectancy of flight in all their flocks of leaves, while the oaks and elms are gathered in their station. All this is not Japanese, but from such accident is Japanese art inspired, with its good luck of perceptiveness.

What symmetry is to form, that is repetition in the art of ornament. Greek art and Gothic alike have series, with repetition or counterchange for their ruling motive. It is hardly necessary to draw the distinction between this motive and that of the Japanese. The Japanese motives may be defined as uniqueness and position. And these were not known as motives of decoration before the study of Japanese decoration. Repetition and counterchange, of course, have their place in Japanese ornament, as in the diaper patterns for which these people have so singular an invention, but here, too, uniqueness and position are the principal inspiration. And it is quite worth while, and much to the present purpose, to call attention to the chief peculiarity of the Japanese diaper patterns, which is _interruption_. Repetition there must necessarily be in these, but symmetry is avoided by an interruption which is, to the Western eye, at least, perpetually and freshly unexpected. The place of the interruptions of lines, the variation of the place, and the avoidance of correspondence, are precisely what makes Japanese design of this class inimitable. Thus, even in a repeating pattern, you have a curiously successful effect of impulse. It is as though a separate intention had been formed by the designer at every angle. Such renewed consciousness does not make for greatness. Greatness in design has more peace than is found in the gentle abruptness of Japanese lines, in their curious brevity. It is scarcely necessary to say that a line, in all
other schools of art, is long or short according to its place and purpose; but only the Japanese designer so contrives his patterns that the line is always short; and many repeating designs are entirely composed of this various and variously-occurring brevity, this prankish avoidance of the goal. Moreover, the Japanese evade symmetry, in the unit of their repeating patterns, by another simple device—that of numbers. They make a small difference in the number of curves and of lines. A great difference would not make the same effect of variety; it would look too much like a contrast. For example, three rods on one side and six on another would be something else than a mere variation, and variety would be lost by the use of them. The Japanese decorator will vary three in this place by two in that, and a sense of the defeat of symmetry is immediately produced. With more violent means the idea of symmetry would have been neither suggested nor refuted.

Leaving mere repeating patterns and diaper designs, you find, in Japanese compositions, complete designs in which there is no point of symmetry. It is a balance of suspension and of antithesis. There is no sense of lack of equilibrium, because place is, most subtly, made to have the effect of giving or of subtracting value. A small thing is arranged to reply to a large one, for the small thing is placed at the precise distance that makes it a (Japanese) equivalent. In Italy (and perhaps in other countries) the scales commonly in use are furnished with only a single weight that increases or diminishes in value according as you slide it nearer or farther upon a horizontal arm. It is equivalent to so many ounces when it is close to the upright, and to so many pounds when it hangs from the farther end of the horizontal rod. Distance plays some such part with the twig or the bird in the upper corner of a Japanese composition. Its place is its significance and its value. Such an art of position implies a great art of intervals. The Japanese chooses a few things and leaves the space between them free, as free as the pauses or silences in music. But as time, not silence, is the subject, or material, of contrast in musical pauses, so it is the measurement of space—that is, collocation—that makes the value of empty intervals. The space between this form and that, in a Japanese composition, is valuable because it is just so wide and no more. And this, again, is only another way of saying that position is the principle of this apparently wilful art.

Moreover, the alien art of Japan, in its pictorial form, has helped to justify the more stenographic school of etching. Greatly transcending Japanese expression, the modern etcher has undoubtedly accepted moral support from the islands of the Japanese. He too etches a kind of shorthand, even though his notes appeal much to the spectator's knowledge, while the Oriental shorthand appeals to nothing but the spectator's simple vision. Thus the two artists work in ways dissimilar. Nevertheless, the French etcher would never have written his signs so freely had not the Japanese so freely drawn his own. Furthermore still, the transitory and destructible material of Japanese art has done as much as the multiplication of newspapers, and the discovery of processes, to reconcile the European designer—the black and white artist—to working for the day, the day of publication. Japan lives much of its daily life by means of paper, painted; so does Europe by means of paper, printed. But as we, unlike those Orientals, are a destructive people, paper with us means short life, quick abolition, transformation, re-appearance, a very circulation of life. This is our present way of surviving ourselves—the new version of that feat of life. Time was when to survive yourself meant to secure, for a time indefinitely longer than the life of man, such dull form as you had given to your work; to intrude upon posterity. To survive yourself, to-day, is to let your work go into daily oblivion.

Now, though the Japanese are not a destructive people, their paper does not last for ever, and that material has clearly suggested to them a different condition of ornament from that with which they adorned old lacquer, fine ivory, or other perdurable things. For the transitory material they keep the more purely pictorial art of landscape. What of Japanese landscape? Assuredly it is too far reduced to a monotonous convention to merit the serious study of races that have produced Cotman and Corot. Japanese landscape-drawing reduces things seen to such fewness as must have made the art insuperably tedious to any people less fresh-spirited and more inclined to take themselves seriously than these Orientals. A preoccupied people would never endure it. But a little closer attention from the Occidental student might find for their evasive attitude towards landscape—it is an attitude almost traitorously evasive—a more significant reason. It is that the distances, the greatness, the winds and the waves of the world, coloured plains, and the flight of a sky, are all certainly alien to the perceptions of a people intent upon little deformities. Does it seem harsh to define by that phrase the curious Japanese search for accidents? Upon such search these people are avowedly intent, even though they show themselves capable of exquisite appreciation of the form of a normal bird and of the habit of growth of a normal flower. They are not in search of the perpetual slight novelty which was Aristotle's ideal of the language poetic ("a
little wildly, or with the flower of the mind," says Emerson of the way of a poet's speech)--and such novelty it is, like the frequent pulse of the pinion, that keeps verse upon the wing; no, what the Japanese are intent upon is perpetual slight disorder. In Japan the man in the fields has eyes less for the sky and the crescent moon than for some stone in the path, of which the asymmetry strikes his curious sense of pleasure in fortunate accident of form. For love of a little grotesque strangeness he will load himself with the stone and carry it home to his garden. The art of such a people is not liberal art, not the art of peace, and not the art of humanity. Look at the curls and curves whereby this people conventionally signify wave or cloud. All these curls have an attitude which is like that of a figure slightly malformed, and not like that of a human body that is perfect, dominant, and if bent, bent at no lowly or niggling labour. Why these curves should be so charming it would be hard to say; they have an exquisite prankishness of variety, the place where the upward or downward scrolls curl off from the main wave is delicately unexpected every time, and--especially in gold embroideries--is sensitively fit for the material, catching and losing the light, while the lengths of waving line are such as the long gold threads take by nature.

A moment ago this art was declared not human. And, in fact, in no other art has the figure suffered such crooked handling. The Japanese have generally evaded even the local beauty of their own race for the sake of perpetual slight deformity. Their beauty is remote from our sympathy and admiration; and it is quite possible that we might miss it in pictorial presentation, and that the Japanese artist may have intended human beauty where we do not recognise it. But if it is not easy to recognise, it is certainly not difficult to guess at. And, accordingly, you are generally aware that the separate beauty of the race, and its separate dignity, even--to be very generous--has been admired by the Japanese artist, and is represented here and there occasionally, in the figure of warrior or mousme. But even with this exception the habit of Japanese figure-drawing is evidently grotesque, derisive, and crooked. It is curious to observe that the search for slight deformity is so constant as to make use, for its purposes, not of action only, but of perspective foreshortening. With us it is to the youngest child only that there would appear to be mirth in the drawing of a man who, stooping violently forward, would seem to have his head "beneath his shoulders." The European child would not see fun in the living man so presented, but--unused to the same effect "in the flat"--he thinks it prodigiously humorous in a drawing. But so only when he is quite young. The Japanese keeps, apparently, his sense of this kind of humour. It amuses him, but not perhaps altogether as it amuses the child, that the foreshortened figure should, in drawing and to the unpractised eye, seem distorted and dislocated; the simple Oriental appears to find more derision in it than the simple child. The distortion is not without a suggestion of ignominy. And, moreover, the Japanese shows derision, but not precisely scorn. He does not hold himself superior to his hideous models. He makes free with them on equal terms. He is familiar with them.

And if this is the conviction gathered from ordinary drawings, no need to insist upon the ignoble character of those that are intentional caricatures.

Perhaps the time has hardly come for writing anew the praises of symmetry. The world knows too much of the abuse of Greek decoration, and would be glad to forget it, with the intention of learning that art afresh in a future age and of seeing it then anew. But whatever may be the phases of the arts, there is the abiding principle of symmetry in the body of man, that goes erect, like an upright soul. Its balance is equal. Exterior human symmetry is surely a curious physiological fact where there is no symmetry interiorly. For the centres of life and movement within the body are placed with Oriental inequality. Man is Greek without and Japanese within. But the absolute symmetry of the skeleton and of the beauty and life that cover it is accurately a principle. It controls, but not tyrannously, all the life of human action. Attitude and motion disturb perpetually, with infinite incidents--inequalities of work, war, and pastime, inequalities of sleep--the symmetry of man. Only in death and "at attention" is that symmetry complete in attitude. Nevertheless, it rules the dance and the battle, and its rhythm is not to be destroyed. All the more because this hand holds the goad and that the harrow, this the shield and that the sword, because this hand rocks the cradle and that caresses the unequal heads of children, is this rhythm the law; and grace and strength are inflections thereof. All human movement is a variation upon symmetry, and without symmetry it would not be variation; it would be lawless, fortuitous, and as dull and broadcast as lawless art. The order of inflection that is not infraction has been explained in a most authoritative sentence of criticism of literature, a sentence that should save the world the trouble of some of its futile, violent, and weak experiments: "Law, the rectitude of humanity," says Mr Coventry Patmore, "should be the
poet's only subject, as, from time immemorial, it has been the subject of true art, though many a true artist has done the Muse's will and knew it not. As all the music of verse arises, not from infraction but from inflection of the law of the set metre; so the greatest poets have been those the _modulus_ of whose verse has been most variously and delicately inflected, in correspondence with feelings and passions which are the inflections of moral law in their theme. Law puts a strain upon feeling, and feeling responds with a strain upon law. Furthermore, Aristotle says that the quality of poetic language is a continual _slight_ novelty. In the highest poetry, like that of Milton, these three modes of inflection, metrical, linguistical, and moral, all chime together in praise of the truer order of life."

And like that order is the order of the figure of man, an order most beautiful and most secure when it is put to the proof. That perpetual proof by perpetual inflection is the very condition of life. Symmetry is a profound, if disregarded because perpetually inflected, condition of human life.

The nimble art of Japan is unessential; it may come and go, may settle or be fanned away. It has life and it is not without law; it has an obvious life, and a less obvious law. But with Greece abides the obvious law and the less obvious life: symmetry as apparent as the symmetry of the form of man, and life occult like his unequal heart. And this seems to be the nobler and the more perdurable relation.

(The end)
Alice Meynell's essay: Symmetry And Incident

By Alice Meynell