

[Thoughts on a Symposium]

John La Farge and the Awakening to Eastern Spirituality: An Aspect of Early North American Japonisme

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John La Farge (1835–1910) was a New York-based American artist who was also active in Boston. Under the influence of the Gothic Revival, he was instrumental in the stained glass renaissance. Technically innovative, he employed the so-called “opalescent” glass with milky white glimmer, which Tiffany would adopt from him.¹⁾ It should also be noted that Okakura Kakuzō dedicated *The Book of Tea* to La Farge. The dedication, however, has tended to be omitted in the posthumous editions, making today’s readers oblivious to its implications.

Senior to Okakura by almost thirty years, La Farge took an interest in Japan well ahead of his time. Of French descent, he published “An Essay on Japanese Art” (1870) in a publication that was related to Commodore Perry’s report on his expedition to Japan, in which he insisted that art and industry developed hand in hand in Japan.²⁾ At this stage already La Farge was evidently well versed in the notion of “*disymétrie*,” proposed by the French critic Ernest Chesneau as specific to Japanese aesthetics. La Farge’s circle also included James Jackson Jarves (1818–1888), critic and the author of *A Glimpse at the Art of Japan* (1876), who from early on saw the essence of Japanese aesthetics in “*disymétrie*.”

Henry Adams, a close friend of La Farge’s, came from a distinguished family of illustrious ancestors including the Second President of the United States who was his great-grandfather. After his wife’s suicide, Adams sought consolation in a transpacific voyage, which he had planned with the deceased. Taking La Farge, a boon companion and good mixer, he thus left for Japan in 1886 [Meiji 19]. It was also during this trip that Okakura, still in his twenties, made La Farge’s acquaintance.

The travel led to a series of fine works, such as watercolor sketches of the Kamakura Great Buddha, Nikkō and Kyoto. Of particular note here is *Meditation of Kuwannon* (c. 1886; fig.1), which shows the bodhisattva in a lotus position by a waterfall. *Merciful Mother Kannon (Hibo Kannon)* (fig.2), a masterpiece of modern Japanese art, is generally assumed to have been executed by Kano Hōgai two years later (1888) at Okakura’s fervent plea. Although the work has been celebrated for breaking out of the style of traditional Buddhist painting, the chronology suggests that we should not entirely exclude La Farge’s possible impact on Hōgai via Okakura. If so, then this would be a very singular instance that upends the conventional preconception in the discussion on the Western taste for East Asian and Japanese things, according to

which the influence invariably goes from the Orient to the Occident. Further lineage can be traced from *Hibo Kannon* to *Bharat Mata* (1902–1905; fig.3), the figure of “Mother India” by Abanindranath Tagore who spearheaded the Bengal Renaissance. Another known example of La Farge’s East Asian inspired work is *The Strange Thing Little Kiosai Saw in the River* (1897; fig.4), a piece rather grotesque in taste. Inspired by Kawanabe Kyōsai’s eyewitness account, the picture shows a decapitated female head on the Sumida River.³⁾ *A Rishi Stirring Up a Storm* (c. 1897; fig.5) may suggest inputs from Okakura.

La Farge attempted to fuse the East and the West not only in subject matter but in his theory on technique as well. The painter John Leighton, quoted in *The Capital of the Tycoon* (1863) by the one-time British Consul-General in Japan Rutherford Alcock, had categorically stated that without proper *chiaroscuro*, Japan possessed no “painting” to speak of. As though to turn Leighton’s value system on its head, however, La Farge in his aforementioned “Notes” found a virtue in Japanese art, one equivalent to the craftsmanship in the European Middle Ages. Emergent here was a move away from the Euro-centric value judgment. Incidentally, Alcock would himself convert to William Morris’s tenets fifteen years later in his 1878 book *Art and Art Industries in Japan*, now taking a favorable view on the fact that Japanese art industries lacked “major arts.”⁴⁾

This brings us to the fact that Fenollosa, who stayed in Japan as a government-hired foreign advisor, was also to propose a theory that would replace the Euro-American academic practice of *chiaroscuro* with his concept of “*notan*,” or dark-light principle, as described in *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* that was published posthumously.⁵⁾ Evident here is an attitude that refuses to see the existence of “*chiaroscuro*” as the essential condition for “painting” and recognizes instead an alternative value in Eastern pictorial arts’ “*notan*.”⁶⁾ Or perhaps are we even to see an unexpected trace of La Farge’s impact in this value system proposed by Fenollosa, the artist having been the very first to awake to Japanese painting? Whereas “*chiaroscuro*” consists in the light/shadow contrast to depict the concavity and convexity of the represented object, “*notan*” is a musical concept that denotes the arrangement of harmony across the entire picture surface. With an evident affinity with Whistler’s aesthetics of “harmony,” the idea would be refined into a principle of art education under Fenollosa’s direct influence in his student Arthur Wesley Dow’s textbook *Composition*. This latter widely

circulated not just in the English-speaking countries but beyond as well, including German-speaking regions and Poland.

Further, La Farge was increasingly attracted by stained glass, which diffuses color within an interior, mediating lights from outside in through glass. Some of his works in this medium, which arrange Chinese and Japanese peonies on a deep Prussian blue background (fig. 6), are known to consciously emulate the mount of a Japanese *kakemono* [hanging scroll] for the design of their borders. Dow's aforementioned *Composition*, too, contained demonstrations of the idea of elaborating different compositions on the basis of an orthogonal grid, inspired by wooden lattices of the *tokonoma* in Japanese houses, an idea also resonating in the architect Frank Lloyd Wright's stained glasses designs. May the same idea have exerted its influence even on Piet Mondrian's geometric abstract painting? Setting colored glass plates in a lead frame, stained glass harbored such possibilities.⁷⁾

To return to La Farge's stained-glass production, its other underpinning was a lofty ideal, one that aimed to manifest the Grace of God—emanating through the Light that flows into an interior, as medieval theology conceived it—by marrying industry and art. This ideal, in tune with the Arts and Crafts Movement, also led the artist to an awakening to the Oriental spirituality.

“The artist can escape from the rules of his intelligence, can become a being that does not judge. . . . As if he felt the breath that animates the world behind a concerning of what we call realities.” These words, written by La Farge in the August 1889 issue of *Scribner's Magazine*, unmistakably evince a will to look through illusions in the Buddhist sense (*Māyā*) to the underlying world of true essence.⁸⁾ Discernible here is the American intellectual ethos of the time that resonates with Emerson's Transcendentalism as well as Whitman's poetry. Their circle also included a current that saw an affinity between the Unitarian belief and Buddhist thought.

If Henry Adams, even though it was he who invited La Farge to travel to Japan with him, did not find the country's scenery and customs quite to his liking, another contrasting figure comes to mind here: the philosopher William James, who was connected with La Farge.⁹⁾ The brother of the writer Henry James, William was a close friend of Charles Peirce as well as Paul Carus, who strove to synthesize Eastern and Western philosophies at the Open Court Publishing Company in Chicago. It was under Carus that the young Suzuki Teitarō, later to be known as Daisetz, engaged in English translation of the Eastern classics. Carus's translation of *Tao Te Ching* would soon serve Okakura's *The Book of Tea*.¹⁰⁾ One point of convergence for these currents was the Parliament of the World's Religions, held in conjunction with the 1893

World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.¹¹⁾ This brief sketch alone throws into sharper relief La Farge's singular place within the intellectual constellation of the time.

After 1890, La Farge's spiritual wandering took him to Hawaii, and further to Tahiti and its manners and customs.¹²⁾ One senses here an impulse with an evident affinity, for example, to Gauguin's aspiration for the primitive (figs. 7–8). La Farge's interest in the South Pacific partook in the tendency that sought to identify an Eastern wisdom in Tahiti's myths and its idea of metempsychosis. La Farge's case, however, has often been dismissed as a mere tributary of the modernist thought, which bestows the status of “precursors” on Gauguin and others. And yet chronological examination urges us to reevaluate La Farge as a pioneering artist ahead of Gauguin.¹³⁾

To return to the making of stained glass, it can no longer be regarded as a mere archaism, an anachronistic evasion into Medievalism that would be the mark of an aesthetic conservatism. The practice was also intimately related to *cloisonisme*, the pictorial style founded by Louis Anquetin in the *fin-de-siècle* Paris on the basis of Gauguin's advice received in Pont Aven, which later spread to the Nabis. Named thus for its resemblance with the *yūsen-shippō* [*cloisonné*] technique, the style was equally intended to produce the chromatic effects of a stained glass, of the lead frame slotted with glass plates.¹⁴⁾

In retrospect, La Farge more often than not has been eclipsed by the mainstream North American modernism, precisely because of his modernity, too advanced for his generation. In the 1980s, scholars like Henry Adams, perhaps still trapped in the modernist value system, had an undeniable propensity for pointing to La Farge's belatedness in relation to the cutting-edge of the time.¹⁵⁾ Vividly responding to Buddhism and visioning a “living Pan” in the forest of Nikkō,¹⁶⁾ La Farge was a spirit that opened itself up to the “Other within” before anyone else. The constellation formed by this and other intellects across the East/West boundaries calls for further investigations.

(Translated by KONDŌ Gaku)

*) The present essay is inspired by the symposium “John La Farge and Nikko: The Pioneer of the Stained Glass Revival and Japonisme in the USA,” a Tohoku Gakuin University Research Branding Project, February 24, 2018. The ideas explored here have been developed from my impromptu comments on the papers. The La Farge quotes in the text are taken from the handouts distributed at the symposium. My thanks to the speakers: Phylis Floyd, Katie Kresser, Ariki Kōji, Gomi Ryōko, and the organizer Prof. Suzuki Michitaka. The project was co-sponsored by the Society for the Study of Japonisme.

Notes

- 1) Although the relationship between the two are known to have been tense at times, precisely concerning the patenting of the opalescent technique, here I follow the standard view that acknowledges La Farge as its inventor.
- 2) The text was published as a chapter in *Across America and Asia: Notes of a Five-years' Journey Around the World and of Residence in Arizona, Japan and China* (1870) by Raphael Pumpelly, who reportedly commissioned the text from La Farge for he felt unqualified for treating the subject. As is well known, La Farge's wife, Margaret Perry, was a granddaughter of the older brother of Commodore Perry.
- 3) Although in his book *Kyōsai gadan* [*Kyōsai's Account of Painting*], the artist in fact states specifically that the head was male, here I follow the description given in one of the symposium papers.
- 4) See my *Kaiga no tōhō: Orientarizumu kara japonisumu e* [*L'Orient de la peinture, de l'Orientalisme au Japonisme*] (The University of Nagoya Press, 1999), 152-153.
- 5) The volume was translated into Japanese by Ariga Nagao as *Tōyō bijutsushi kō* [*Outline of Oriental Art History*] in 1921.
- 6) See my "Bunka no hon'yaku-sei josetsu: zōkei geijutsu ni okeru" ["Preliminary Remarks on Culture-as-Translation: Instances in Plastic Arts"], in "*Bijutsu*" *gainen no saikōchiku: "bunrui no jidai" no owari ni* [*Toward Updating the Concept of "Bijutsu (Art)": At the End of the "Age of Classification"*], ed. Kokusai Shimpoziumu "Nihon ni okeru 'bijutsu' gainen no saikōchiku" Kiroku Henshū linkai (Brücke, 2017), 301-303.
- 7) See my discussion on this point in *Nihon bijutsu-shi no kindai to sono gaibu* [*Modern History of Japanese Art and its Outside*] (NHK-shuppan, 2018), 118-120.
- 8) John La Farge, "Concerning Painters Who Would express Themselves," *Scribner's Magazine*, XXVI (August 1899): 256.
- 9) William trained for a time to become a painter and (along with his younger brother Henry) studied with William Morris Hunt in Newport, Rhode Island, where La Farge, too, was a pupil of this latter. Hunt was the only painter that La Farge, largely self-taught in his artistic training, called a teacher. It was around this time that La Farge and the James brothers entered into a close friendship, which probably accounts for Henry's predilection for painting and his painter novels. My thanks to Murai Noriko for bringing this point to my attention.
- 10) See my "The Way is in the Passage rather than the Path: *Cha no hon wa ika ni Pōru Keirasu yaku Dōtoku kyō* no issetsu wo yomikaeta ka" ["The Way is in the Passage rather than the Path: How *The Book of Tea* Reinterpreted a Passage from Paul Carus's English Translation of *Tao Te Ching*"], *Tosho Shinbun* (*Book Review Press*), no. 3262, July 9, 2016.
- 11) Cf. Yoshinaga Shin'ichi, ed., "Hirai Kinzō ni okeru Meiji bukkyō no kokusai-ka ni kansuru shūkyō-shi bunka-shi teki kenkyū" ["Studies in Religious and Cultural Histories on the Internationalization of the Meiji-era Buddhism in Hirai Kinzō"], *Research reports supported by grant-in-aid for scientific research (C)* (16520060), March 2007.
- 12) See *John La Farge's Second Paradise: Voyages in the South Seas, 1890-1891*, October 19, 2010-January 2, 2011, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn.; January 22, 2011-March 27, 2011, Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Mass.
- 13) It is worth remembering the fact that Dow had stayed in Pont Aven in Brittany, France, before Gauguin. On this point again my thanks to Murai Noriko for her remark.
- 14) The British Japonisme should rather be located in the lineage of the Gothic Revival Medievalism. On this point see Watanabe Toshio, "Kindai sei'yō bijutsu gainen no hensen ni okeru japonisumu no yakuwari" ["Japonisme's Role in the Shift in the Modern Western Concept of Art"], in "*Bijutsu*" *gainen no saikōchiku*, op.cit., 268-271.
- 15) See Henry Adams, "The Mind of John La Farge," in *John La Farge* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 1987), 41, and Idem, "John La Farge's Discovery of Japanese Art: A New Perspective on the Origins of Japonisme," *The Art Bulletin*, LXVII, no. 3 (September 1985): 449-485.
- 16) "The great Pan might still be living here" (John La Farge, *An Artist's Letters from Japan* [New York, 1897], 160). See also Ido Keiko, *Aoi me ni utsutta Nikkō: Gaikokujin no Nikkō hakken* [*Nikkō as seen through Blue Eyes: The Discovery of Nikkō by Foreigners*] (Shimotsuke-shinbun-sha, 2015).