

Osvald Sirén's Encounter with the Arts of China and Japan

Minna TÖRMÄ

Christie's Education

This essay focuses on two early texts by Finnish-Swedish art historian Osvald Sirén (1879–1966): *Rytm och form* (“Rhythm and Form,” 1917) and *Den Gyllene Paviljongen* (“The Golden Pavilion,” 1919).¹ Partial translations of these texts have appeared in English; however, they are generally not well known.² The first one, “Rhythm and Form,” was based on lectures he delivered at the University of Stockholm during the autumn term in 1916 and the second one, “The Golden Pavilion,” was born after his first visit to East Asia in 1918, concentrating on the arts and culture of Japan, though it contains observations on Chinese art as well.

Nonetheless, these two books reveal his enchantment and appreciation of the arts of China and Japan, respectively, and the initial discoveries that lay at the base of his later scholarship on the arts of China. Sirén, an ardent theosophist throughout his life, was always in search of the spiritual values in art, whether in sculpture, painting, architecture or garden art. These spiritual values were manifested not only in works born under the aegis of Buddhism or Daoism—Sirén particularly appreciated Chan Buddhist painting—but in landscape paintings or the rock formations of East Asian gardens.

Before discussing these two publications in detail, a few words on Sirén's background and how he came to be interested in the arts of East Asia would be in place. Sirén was born in Finland (then an autonomous part of the Russian Empire) and received his Ph.D in art history in Helsinki in 1900; already by that time he had moved to Stockholm working partly at the Nationalmuseum and he became a Swedish citizen in 1903. The topic of his doctoral dissertation was a Swedish 18th century genre painter, but his following publications were on Italian art. He established his place in Swedish Academia, when he became professor of art history at the University of Stockholm in 1908 (a position which he held until 1923).

In the 1910s he attained international renown as a scholar of Italian painting, particularly with his book on the Renaissance painter Leonardo da Vinci. This led to an invitation to lecture at universities on

1 I wish to express my thanks to Shigemi Inaga for inviting me to take part in the conference at Nichibunken and to the staff at Nichibunken, particularly Tomoko Honda and Yoshifumi Kita. In addition, thanks to Jukka Cadogan at the Department of Art History in the University of Helsinki for assisting me with some of the illustrations.

2 Osvald Sirén, “Studies of Chinese and European Painting,” 1-7, *Theosophical Path* 14 and 15 (1918); Osvald Sirén, *Essentials in Art* (London and New York: John Lane, 1920); Osvad Sirén, “Japanese Cities: Along the Streets in Old Towns,” *Theosophical Path* 16 (1919). For details of Sirén's bibliography, see: Gunhild Österman, ed. *Osvaldo Sirén: Octogenario* (Stockholm: Nationalmuseum, 1960).

the United States East Coast: Harvard, Yale and Princeton. He lectured on Giotto and his followers—he was more and more drawn to earlier phases of Italian painting (13th and 14th centuries), to the work of so called Italian primitive masters.

It was around this time, in 1914 or early 1915, when he visited the East Asian galleries in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and encountered paintings of Lohans, which had formerly belonged to Daitokujii monastery in Kyoto.³ In front of them he experienced a kind of revelation, an enchantment, which inspired him to learn more about this art he found so powerfully expressive, writing later that he turned to East Asian painting in his search for the essentials in religious purity:

The austere religious paintings in China would perhaps least be expected to captivate a western viewer. They describe nothing, yet can be seen to work like some kind of spiritual symbols or church music, by waking up a feeling of human beings' inner correspondence with higher spiritual beings.⁴

Sirén planned to travel to East Asia already in late spring of 1916, but could not realize this plan due to other obligations (lectures and cataloguing).⁵ Instead, he decided to give a lecture series at the University of Stockholm during the autumn term in 1916 on European and Chinese art, a comparison focusing mainly on the art of painting. And, as I mentioned at the beginning, these lectures were published the following year as *Rytm och form*.

In Italian art history Sirén considered the paintings by the thirteenth century Tuscan artists to be the most interesting and pure expression of religious spirit. He found that the paintings of that time had close points in common with both the most vital trends in contemporary art of his time and the religious art of China and Japan. According to Sirén, an artist gave visual form to his feelings and that form transmitted that feeling to the viewer. As such form was empty and lifeless, it had to have a soul and this life-giving vitality was rhythm. In his discussion of rhythm, Sirén referred to both music and dance as the clearest and most common examples of art forms utilizing the life-giving force of rhythm.

An artist working with visual form, however, could not transfer the movements of his soul directly to vibrations like a musician could. Instead a painter needs to use symbolic form together with line and color values. Therefore, since rhythm is such an elemental part of our lives it necessarily manifests itself in all human activity. In general, painting as an art offered, within the field of visual art, the most varied and abundant possibilities for rhythmical expression.

3 In his later reminiscences about the event, Sirén could not remember when exactly this memorable visit had taken place: Freer Gallery of Art, ed, *First Presentation of the Charles Lang Freer Medal* [Osvald Sirén] (Washington, D. C.: Freer Gallery of Art, 1956), 19. However, details of his travels can be traced: Osvald Sirén, a handwritten curriculum vitae dated Feb. 23, 1916, Paul J. Sachs files, Harvard University Museum Archives, Cambridge, MA.

4 Osvald Sirén, *Rytm och form* (Stockholm: Bröderna Lagerström, 1917), 72.

5 Osvald Sirén, letter October 14, 1915, Styrelsens protokoll, November 9, 1915 § 9, Stockholms Högskola, Riksarkivet, Stockholm.



Fig. 1 Simone Martini, *Annunciation* (Uffizi, Florence), from Osvald Sirén, *Rytm och form* (opposite page 47)

I would also argue that Sirén's acquaintance with Chinese painting played a pivotal role in this strong emphasis on rhythm, that it became the central element of an art work for him. In *Rytm och form*, Sirén introduced to his Swedish audience Xie He's *Liufa* ("Six Principles"), following Okakura Kakuzō's and Laurence Binyon's translations. The Six Principles have remained in one form or another at the core of Chinese art criticism written by them.

The first one of these principles, *qiyun shengdong*, concerns rhythm and this principle has elicited page after page of commentary among western writers. In Okakura's translation the first principle is "The Life-movement of the Spirit through the Rhythm of Things" and in Binyon's "Rhythmic Vitality, or Spiritual Rhythm expressed in the movement of life."⁶

How was rhythm then manifested concretely in painting? I shall take up here one example from Sirén, a comparison of the *Admonitions* scroll attributed to Gu Kaizhi (ca. 344–ca. 406) in the British Museum and Simone Martini's (c. 1284–1344) *Annunciation* in the Uffizi, in Florence (Figs. 1 and 2). As points in common in these paintings, Sirén singled out that both paintings are strictly two dimensional and figures have been placed against a neutral background. The musical rhythm of the lines expresses symbolically emotions. In the *Admonitions* painting "[t]he artistic expression depends entirely on the rhythm of the line which unites all parts."⁷ And though he gives praise to Martini and almost places him on a par with Gu Kaizhi, he, nonetheless, sees Martini as a painter to be more primitive and not as sophisticated as Gu Kaizhi.

The following lengthy quotation on the comparison of these two paintings will also serve as a good



Fig. 2 Attributed to Gu Kaizhi, *Admonitions*, details of a handscroll (British Museum, London), from Osvald Sirén, *Rytm och form* (opposite page 33)

6 Okakura Kakuzō, *The Ideals of the East* (5th printing of 1970 ed. of 1904 original; Rutland and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1985), 52; Laurence Binyon, *The Flight of the Dragon* (London: J. Murray, 1911), 12–13.

7 Sirén, "Studies in Chinese and European Painting," 432.

example of Sirén's inspired writing and analysis:

His [Martini's] art is permeated with naïve conscientiousness and religious devotion, while the old Chinese painting displays an almost artificial refinement, a ceremonious courtliness that endows even the scenes of daily life in the imperial palace with exquisite beauty and taste. In Simone's painting we get the impression that the artists was struggling with difficulties of material expression, while the Chinese painter impresses us by his absolute mastery of means and methods. Simone seems to realize the gulf between material forms and poetic conceptions, and tries to overcome it by the musical flow of line, yet he cannot free himself from the desire to accentuate the limitations of form and space; he sharply defines the horizontal and vertical planes, thus producing the effect of foreground and background which in the Chinese painting is dissolved by complete absence of such limitations.⁸

According to one of his students, Gustaf Munthe (1896–1962), Sirén had at some later point in his life described the book as immature, but Munthe considers it to be “nevertheless one of the most inspiring books on art ever written in Swedish. At least for those who were then young students the book—or, one should say, the lectures on which the book was based—provided a great and in many respects, a vital experience.”⁹ Even today, reader of this book can feel the fresh enthusiasm towards a newly discovered world of art and the need to convince others equally of its importance.

In 1918 then, at the end of December, Sirén boarded the steamer *Shinya Maru* in San Francisco. In his pockets he carried letters of introduction written by the American collector Charles Freer to Nomura Yōzō (1870–1965), Hara Tomitarō (1868–1939) and Masuda Takashi (1848–1938), and it was them (the letters) which allowed him entrance to the homes of Japanese collectors.



Fig. 3 Photograph of Kinkakuji or “Golden Pavilion” by Osvald Sirén, from Osvald Sirén, *Den Gyllene Paviljongen* (opposite the title page)

In East Asia, Sirén became enchanted by the Japanese gardens and also the Chinese ones, though what he exactly saw during his brief visit in China is somewhat unclear. This voyage is well documented for its Japanese sojourn in *Den Gyllene Paviljongen: Minnen och Studier från Japan* (“The Golden Pavilion: Mementos and Studies from Japan,” 1919). It is entitled after the famous Kyoto temple of Kinkakuji, better known in English as The Golden Pavilion (Fig. 3). He had set out to write a tourist guide, though in the end the re-

8 Sirén, “Studies in Chinese and European Painting,” 433.

9 Gustaf Munthe, “Introduction” in Österman, *Osvaldo Siren*.

sult became a kind of hybrid of tourist literature and art history, as he himself describes it in the preface.

Japan—its art and customs—are then the focus of the book. In the more scholarly sections of the book, such as those dealing with architecture and sculpture, he draws on his observations and also on the studies that had been published in Western languages during the early twentieth century. He is more informal when discussing his visit to Japanese museums and private collections or when trying to transmit the atmosphere of Kyoto to the reader. The last chapter, which shares the title of the book, combines personal observations and historical facts in an ingenious way: its focus is Ashikaga culture and its sources.

During the early years of the twentieth century, Chan or Zen painting was seen as a high point of Japanese and Chinese painting. Southern Song Chinese painting was also admired. Sirén did have a fascination of these kinds of paintings as well and in this book this kind of painting is his focus. Sirén was familiar with the books written by Okakura and he had read Fenollosa's *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*. The Japanese had collected and studied Chinese art already for centuries and it was common at that time that the Japanese acted as 'guides' for a western scholar or collector interested in Chinese painting; partly because Japan was more accessible than China.

If we think of Japanese connoisseurship, they had one great advantage over the western visitor: they used the same kind of brushes and ink as the Chinese. Therefore they knew the technique from the inside and, additionally, the educated Japanese knew Chinese poetry and calligraphic styles. Western viewers had dismissed East Asian ink painting as sketching, a lower form of art than oil painting. However, I do not mean that the Japanese perception of Chinese painting corresponded with the Chinese view. The difference is explained if we consider what kind of paintings the Japanese had acquired from China. Japanese Buddhist monks who had studied in China during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries played a key role in this story, bringing back from their voyages important religious paintings.

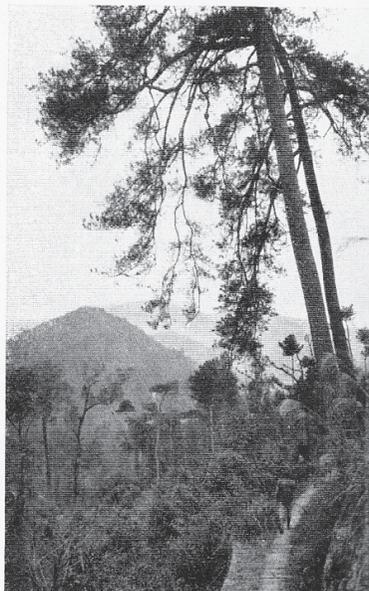
The Japanese did not become interested in the dry and linear mode of brushwork held in high regard in Chinese literati aesthetics. Instead, they remained in touch with the sensibility of Southern Song misty views dominated by ink wash and moist brushwork (Fig. 4). An important genre of ink painting was the spontaneous and unassuming style using only black ink appreciated in tea-aesthetics. Elements from these were incorporated in the Japanese painting tradition, which Sirén calls Ashikaga-painting. By this he refers



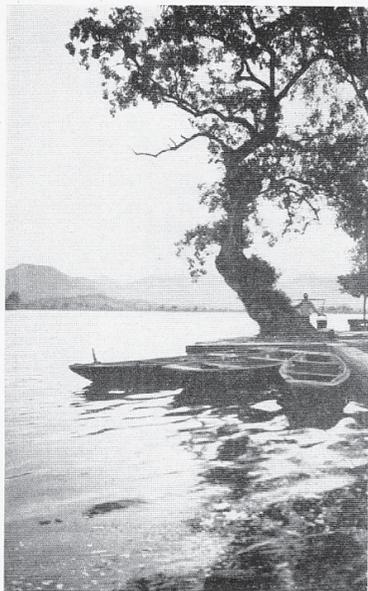
Fig. 4 "Nyorin Kvannon," from Osvald Sirén, *Den Gyllene Paviljongen* (opposite page 65)



Ma Yuan, En man betraktande månen. Markis Kuroda. Tokyo



Vy från Hangchows omgivning



Vy av Västra sjön vid Hangchow



Ma Kuei, Landskap. Greve Tokugawa. Tokyo

Fig. 5 Page (opposite 241) from Osvald Sirén, *Den Gyllene Paviljongen*: two photographs of Hangzhou by Osvald Sirén and paintings by Ma Yuan and Ma Gui.

to the painting of the Muromachi era (1392–1573) when the Ashikaga family had the power, and this designation “Ashikaga painting” was used by Okakura whose books Sirén had read. The Ashikaga shoguns had collected mainly Chinese paintings of the Southern Song dynasty, works by Ma Yuan (act. before 1189–after 1225) and Xia Gui (act. ca. 1200–ca. 1240) or in the tradition of chan.

In Japan, Sirén learned to know many important collectors such as previously mentioned Hara and Masuda; he visited Hara's Sannotani – this visit is actually narrated by Yukio Yashiro in acceptance speech of the Charles L. Freer medal.¹⁰ The last chapter is titled “The Golden Pavilion,” after which the whole book received its name and which refers to the famous temple of Kinkakuji, and it combines personal observations with historical facts in a charming way: its core is formed by the discussion of Ashikaga culture of which Sirén wrote enthusiastically. He seems to have become an ardent admirer of all things valued by the Ashikaga shōguns. This is unsurprising in the light of what was valued by his Japanese hosts.

One of the highlights in the vicinity of Nara was a visit to the nunnery Chūgūji, a moment he clearly had waited for: “Now I could finally see this fine-featured, sophisticated divinity with the enigmatic smile, more obscure and exotic than the Mona Lisa . . .” and when the fusuma were slid aside, Sirén fell to his knees and that part of his soul “which perceives beauty lay on knees in worship.”¹¹ (Fig. 5) He was thus praising a sculpted figure of what he called “Nyorin Kvannon,” but which actually is Miroku Bosatsu.

The visit to China is apparent only in between the lines and in the photographs by Sirén. Freer had suggested that Sirén should visit at least the Buddhist sites of Longmen and Yungang, the cities of Xi'an and Kaifeng, and to ask Langdon Warner (1881–1955) which other cities in inner China would be worth seeing.¹² In *Den Gyllene paviljongen* Sirén speaks of the appearance of Kaifeng as if he were an eyewitness and his own photographs of Hangzhou alternate with Chinese Southern Song paintings in the illustrations for this book. A list of articles purchased in Shanghai in late May testifies to his presence there. A photograph taken in the Lion Grove garden in Suzhou during this time was later published in his book *Gardens of China* (1949). But mostly he is silent about his first impressions of China.

One is somewhat intrigued by the question, why he did not write anything on China after this voyage. My hypothesis on this is that he was already then determined to return to East Asia as soon as possible with a focus on China, in order to collect more material for a publication. And he did; he embarked on his second East Asian journey in the autumn of 1921 which lasted 15 months, but that is another story.

Sirén's basic attitude towards western culture (and life in the West) was skeptical in the sense that he was critical of the ever growing materialism. Instead, he emphasized spiritual values and this has been the viewpoint of theosophical thinking. In Japan he admired the liveliness of the temple life and the solemnity of the rituals. He maintained that the Japanese had a much more straightforward relationship with religions

10 Freer Gallery of Art, ed., *Third Presentation of the Charles Lang Freer Medal* [Yukio Yashiro] (Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art, 1965), 16.

11 Osvald Sirén, *Den Gyllene Paviljongen: Minnen och Studier från Japan* (Stockholm: P.A. Norstedt & Söner, 1919), 64 and 66.

12 Freer Gallery of Art, *First Presentation*, 25.

(than the westerners), more everyday-like – not a Sunday-bound one. He admired the good order, the peaceful disposition of the people and their interest in simplicity, though he pointed out the complexity of Japanese social life. Especially in Kyoto he felt that he had seen glimpses of “the vanishing fairyland of the Far East,” which betrays that he still perceived his surroundings through tropes of exoticism.

When considering particularly the travel writing aspect of Sirén’s work, which is more personal and betrays different facets of his character (when compared with his scholarly writing), one could well pause and reflect on an argument put forth by Rana Kabbani in *Europe’s Myths of Orient*: “To write a literature of travel cannot but imply a colonial relationship. The claim is that one travels to learn, but really, one travels to exercise power over land, women, peoples.”¹³ Sirén would have been appalled, if he had been told this, since he certainly felt that he was there to learn and communicate to the outside world the uniqueness and profoundness of Japanese and Chinese culture and thus spread the mutual understanding between cultures.

13 Rana Kabbani, *Europe’s Myths of Orient* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 10.