Elizabeth Keith (1887–1956): A Marriage of British Art and Japanese Craftsmanship

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Elizabeth Keith – By Itō Shinsui, a wood-block artist noted for his prints of beautiful women (From the collection of Mr Watanabe Shasaburo)

INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Keith was tall and fair. Her striking features were her heavy coils of hair tinged with a glitter of burnished gold, and her hands – large, white and able. She always had a sketch book, and paints and gum-drops in her old bag.

Elizabeth Keith was as free as a bird – no situation was too difficult to be dealt with. She had practically no knowledge of Japanese but she went everywhere – winning all by her gracious eager smile, and her delight in loveliness and beauty – and found a welcome in temples, farm houses, with rich and poor alike. Japanese all enjoyed seeing her at work, lost in the study of her subject, and she could persuade the shyest or the busiest to pose for her. To keep the children still she had learned some children’s songs, and would rattle them off without knowing what it was she was
singing, completely distorting them by her English accent. Her audience would stare transfixed by her lively performance. When further encouragement was needed out came the gum-drops. At times the children shoved and pushed each other and blocked the view of her subject, and she would come out with a phrase which she uttered with startling severity: ‘Gakkô no sensei!’ whereupon all dispersed in terror. (We often wondered why the words ‘school teacher’ should have such an effect, as children appeared on all occasions devoted to their teachers.)

Elizabeth painted the watercolours from which her prints were executed, but did not attempt to cut the wood blocks or print them herself. Like Hiroshige and Hokusai, she followed the old Japanese tradition of turning her designs over to craftsmen for block cutting and printing, supervising the work so as to obtain the effects she wanted. She used the shop of Mr S. Watanabe – a shop still to be found at Nishi Ginza. When printing time came, she would sit on the floor with the artisan for hours on end, day after day, superintending the effects of shading or mixing colors. (One block is needed for each of the colours used in a print – for some prints as many as 15 or 20 blocks are used.)

This marvellous description of an unusual artist was written by Noémi Pernessin, the French wife of the Czech-born American architect Antonin Raymond (1888–1976) who collaborated with Frank Lloyd Wright in building the celebrated Imperial Hotel between 1915 and 1922. The Raymonds, who stayed on in Japan, became good friends with Elizabeth Keith, as well as with my engineer father, Frank Britton,¹ who worked with Antonin Raymond regarding boilers for the hotel. The four of them saw a lot of one another, and my mother always marvelled that her husband, Frank, had not married Elizabeth. But obviously she would not have wanted to give up being ‘free as a bird’, having just embarked on her artistic career. She remained, however, a dear family friend, who often stayed with us together with her sister Jessie.

The Raymonds returned to Japan after the Second World War and Noémi wrote the above for the catalogue of a 1956 exhibition of Keith prints in Tokyo, illustrating it herself with a comic drawing of Elizabeth seated on a stool with her easel, singing to a group of Japanese children. Elizabeth was not at the exhibition. She died, alas, that same year, at the age of only sixty-nine.

BACKGROUND

Elizabeth Keith was born in Aberdeenshire, Scotland in 1887 but the family moved to London when she was eleven years old. Besides a