Hara Bushō (1866–1912)

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INTRODUCTION

Hara Bushō was a Japanese artist who painted portraits in oils and landscapes usually in water colour. He spent three years studying art in London from 1904 to 1907 where he became friends with Yoshio Markino, a Japanese artist who became famous both as a painter and an author. He also met in London the Japanese art critic and poet Yonē Noguchi, father of the sculptor Isamu Noguchi. Noguchi greatly admired Hara Bushō as an artist and as a person. His works which fall into the category of yōga (洋画) are represented in various Japanese galleries devoted to modern art, but he is not as much appreciated or as well known in Japan as might be expected from the fact that Noguchi devoted to Hara Bushō a whole chapter and appendix of his little book The Spirit of Japanese Art 1 in which chapters on such much more famous Japanese artists as Koyetsu [Koetsu], Kenzan, Utamaro, Hiroshige and Kyōsai were included.
LIFE

Hara Bushō was born in 1866 in Okayama as the son of a samurai of the Bizen fief. His given name at birth was Kumanosuke, which he later adapted to Kumasaburō. The name Bushō was his name as an artist. His father wanted his son to become a merchant, but from the age of five or six he liked nothing but to paint pictures and hated all school lessons. He painted every day much to the annoyance of his father who confiscated his son’s paints, brushes and paper. ‘The boy was very sad. He began to draw pictures on the sand with a piece of wood.’ Eventually his father relented and after studying western style painting, especially water colours, under teachers in Okayama he was sent in 1881 to the school of painting in Kyoto which had been opened in 1880. This delighted him and he studied Western Art but, according to what Hara later told Yoshio Markino ‘There was no teacher who really mastered the Western art. First he studied the drawing with Conte [sic], then water-colour and oil. “All the technical parts were absolutely in darkness.”’

His father became bankrupt in 1882, but he received assistance which allowed him to continue his studies and he graduated from the college in 1884, the year in which his father died. In 1885 he became an art teacher in schools. In 1887 he returned to Okayama where he earned his living by painting portraits and background scenes for photographic studios. In the same year he married Taka (1867–1928) whom he had met at a school in Shiga prefecture where he was teaching. As his father had died he had to support, in addition to his wife, his mother and sister. Just before his sister’s wedding Hara had an attack of typhoid fever. Despite his weakness he managed to fill a commission to paint a panorama of the Sino-Japanese War for which he had received a commission. He gave his fee to his sister as dowry.

In 1896 he came to know Itō Yajirō伊藤弥次郎, an industrialist, and was persuaded by him to move to Tokyo. In Tokyo he was introduced among others to the actors Ichikawa Danjurō市川団十郎, the ninth and Onoue Kikugorō尾上菊五郎, who commissioned him to paint their portraits. Hara later described himself to Markino as shibai-kichigai芝居気違い(mad about theatre). ‘He would go on imitating Danjurō for the whole evening.’

Itō urged him to charge higher fees for his portraits, but he was particularly modest about his abilities and refused. He felt that there was no one in Japan who really understood and could teach western style painting. However he managed to save enough money to finance not only his studies in London on which he decided in February 1903 but also to keep his mother and wife at home in Japan.

In preparation for his stay abroad Hara began to study English conversation, but he never seems to have become fluent in the