

[from *Tōkyō Shin-hanjō-ki*, 1874] by Hattori Bushō (1842-1908)

This selection describes one way in which the early curiosity of the Japanese about the West was satisfied. The style is a mock version of the heavy antithesis of Chinese balanced-prose, and there are even allusions to the ancient philosophers.

No less than the soaring eagle, the dung fly beats its wings; the naked savage parades himself with the airs of the elegantly clad. Hence it comes about that the peep show has won such popularity and, together with the photograph, proudly flaunts its banners to-day. It all began when someone opened a place in Asakusa. Within a few months there were peep-show establishments in a number of localities, particularly in the section formerly dominated by mansions of the daimyo. The peep show must have been an invention of those who eat without tilling the fields and who wear clothes which are not of their own weaving. As yet no respected businessmen seem to be promoting this entertainment.

The viewing parlors are for the most part small painted shacks, the fronts of which have been given a hasty coat of whitewash. The rear, however, is neglected, suggesting nothing so much as a slattern who powders her face but leaves her back dirty. Some of these parlors are several stories tall, and the wooden boards with which they are built are painted to resemble stone, exactly like the entrance to some quack doctor's residence. Inside the building, at intervals several feet apart, are arranged a number of machines, and one goes from one machine to another peeping at its display. The front of the machine has eyes like a giant snake, each of which neatly fits the two human eyes. The viewer peeps at the world as through the eye of a needle, and the cost is a mere one sen. Some machines contain

pictures of the scenery of countries all over the world; others are of completely imaginary subjects:

The steel bridge of London is longer than a rainbow; the palace of Paris is taller than the clouds. An enraged Russian general pulls out a soldier's whiskers; a recumbent Italian lady kisses her dog. They have bought an American conflagration to sell us; they have wrapped up a German war to open here. Warships push through the waves in droves; merchant ships enter Port in a forest of masts. A steam engine climbs a mountain; a balloon flies in the sky. Seated one may contemplate the Gape of Good Hope; lying down one may gaze at the Mediterranean. The lion which devours the human being invariably kills from the trunk; the black men who paddle boats remain stuck for all eternity to the bottom.¹ You look at a picture of a museum and despise the pawnshop next door; you peep at a great hospital and lament the headaches of others. As the spectator approaches the last peep show he becomes increasingly aware how cheap the admission price has been. In the last show, the Goddess of Beauty lies naked in bed. Her skin is pure white, except for a small black mole under her navel. It is unfortunate that she has one leg lifted, and we cannot admire what lies within. In another scene we regret that only half the body is exposed and we cannot see the behind; in still another we lament that though face to face we cannot kiss the lips. This marvel among marvels, novelty among novelties, is quite capable of startling the eyes of rustics and untutored individuals.

The above are only a few examples of what one can see. Although the peep show is popular entertainment, when compared to other familiar types it is not without its educational benefits. Unlike the "tigers" of Asakusa, which are actually dyed cats, or the "dragons" of Yorozyo Bridge, which are snakes with painted scales-displays whose falseness becomes apparent in a couple of days, when the paint wears off-the peep shows offer the latest curiosities of the world and the customs of every nation. It is like touring the world at a glance, and should broaden men's knowledge while delighting their eyes. It may be true, as some say, that we cannot be sure

¹ Meaning, probably, that the pictures, unlike life, are always the same.

whether these pictures are true or false without going to the countries they represent, but they are by no means in the same category with a cat painted like a tiger. But, of course, they are no more than second-hand articles from some old ragpicker's shop.

TRANSLATED BY DONALD KEENE

THE THIEVES

[*Shima Chidori Tsuki no Shiranami*, 1881]

by Kawatake Mokuami (1816-1893)

Mokuami was one of Japan's greatest dramatic geniuses. His works number over three hundred, many of which are still performed in *Kabuki* theatres. He is known particularly for portrayals of thieves and other characters of the underworld. *Mokuami* was fortunate in that his plays were performed by *Kabuki* actors of extraordinary brilliance. In *The Thieves*, for example, the ninth *Danjūrō* created the part of *Mochizuki*, the fifth *Kikugorō* that of *Shimazō*, and the first *Sadanji* that of *Senta*. However, the very fact that *Mokuami* was so consummately skilled in meeting the requirements of the *Kabuki* theatre and its actors sometimes lessened the purely literary value of his works.

The Thieves is considered by many to be *Mokuami's* masterpiece. It was written when he was sixty-five years old as his farewell to the theatre, although he actually continued writing for some years afterward. This was the first of his works composed without any collaborators, as was the common practice. The reform of the thieves at the end and the prevalence of the sentiment of "encouraging virtue and chastising vice" has been attributed to *Mokuami's* desire to end on a virtuous note his career as a chronicler of the underworld. Mentions of the telegraph, the legal reforms after the Meiji Restoration, etc., lend a contemporary tone to this play.

Only the last act of *The Thieves* is given here, but it is complete in itself.