

Philipp Franz Balthasar von Siebold

In 1822 a German doctor, Philipp Franz Balthasar von Siebold, a specialist in ophthalmology, took up his post as resident physician and scientist on the artificial island of Dejima, in the Gulf of Nagasaki. He joined a dozen traders, the only inhabitants of the island, collectively known as the Dutch Factory. Von Siebold's expertise in matters of the eye gave him special access to the rest of Japan where he was helped on his mission to collect indigenous flora and fauna and objects of rare beauty hidden from the world for over 200 years. Besides collecting rare artefacts von Siebold recorded countless histories and observations relating to the Japanese people and their culture.



“In the second century of our era, the lord of the Central Empire, having understood that the herb of immortality grew in Japan, and cherishing an aversion for death, sent thither three thousand boys and girls to seek for and bring home this wonderful medicinal vegetable. Instead of obeying their instructions, the whole three thousand settled in Japan.’ [From the Nipponki the journal of Yukino Murazi of Petsi, preserved as one of the chronicles of Japanese history, from 661BC to 696AD, published in 720AD, forming thirty volumes, translated by von Siebold].”



“They greeted us courteously but stood amazed. They were the first Japanese we had seen, and greatly were we struck by their grave appearance and modest behaviour. They spread their mats on deck; each one brought his own box and then a scene, novel to us, began, namely, a Japanese toilet. They removed their garments and washed each of them separately until all stood naked before us. The well-wrung cloth was then struck across their backs in diagonal fashion making between them a constant rhythm by which they worked. Above all, we admired their dexterity in shaving their own heads. Such fearful attention to cleanliness is not normal but the cause of contact with a foreign ship.”

“Tanners, curriers and all others who have the misfortune of handling dead creatures are ostracised and shunned by their fellow countrymen. They are deemed polluted and so must live outside of the towns and hamlets. If they must enter and beg a drink or victual the owner of a tea-house may grant it but would not consider keeping the cup or bowl that had touched the poor wretch's lips. They are not numbered in the census and, worst of all, their villages, when situated on a high road, are not even measured into the length of the road but subtracted from it as nonentities.”

“Mizutami took me to a house to buy a portable grove. Though the interior was dark I could see a painting of a man fishing by a river. This picture, a vase of flowers and the fine wood of the room made a great impression on me. Decoration of the reception rooms to different occasions is studied with the utmost care by the Japanese. In a handsome drawing room there must be a *took* or kind of recess, with shelves made of the finest and most expensive woods. In this recess there must be exhibited a single picture - no more, beneath which must stand a vase with flowers. Not only must this picture be suited to the particular occasion, and therefore constantly changed, but a similar congruity in the flowers is indispensable; the kinds, the manner in which they are intermixed, the number, and even the proportion between the green leaves and the gay blossoms, must all be regulated according to the character of the entertainment.”

“After an hour or two the man was carried out. His eyes rolled in the back of his skull and rigor had set in making it hard for the men to heave his stiff limbs. He had been dressed in a loose fitting silk jerkin rather than the standard work clothes and his skin was painted. The macabre procession passed through the compound, past the gate and over the bridge. The man was dead yet they pretended he was alive because no one is allowed to die on Dejima. The next day all the screens and sliding doors were topsy-turvy and the three women on the veranda of the dead man’s house wore their garments inside out. No one was allowed cross the threshold where the corpse was laid out, washed and clad in a white shroud. Torch bearers led the procession, then priests with incense and sacred books, servants with umbrellas, lanterns and more prayers on strips of white paper. A fire was kindled and spices and oils burnt to purify the dead man’s house. In days gone by the dwelling of the deceased was consumed entirely by fire, excepting those materials saved to build a lasting memorial. Later we saw the mourners flying kites above the bay. The lines tethering the kites twinkled in the evening sunlight. They were covered in shards of glass and the game was to catch the line of another and sever it, releasing the kite into the sky, just as they send the paper lanterns out into the water in search of lost souls.”



“In 522 Sehing-ming-whang, king of Petsi [a Korean state, then the dependant ally of Japan], sent to the dairi a bronze image of Sakya Buddha, with flags, books etc, and a letter proclaiming the doctrine as the very best of all, and that that which is in the book of Buddha be fulfilled, namely “My doctrine shall spread towards the east”. That day the Mikado asked his senior minister whether the image of Buddha should be worshipped. There were at that time no idols in Japan. One minster said ‘The native sovereigns of this realm have made it their business to celebrate the spring, the summer, the autumn, and the winter festivals of one hundred and eighty kamis of heaven and earth, of provinces and of families. If we now introduce innovations, worshipping a foreign kami, it is to be feared that we may anger our own divinities’. But another said ‘All western nations have so worshipped him why should we turn our back on him?’ The Mikado said it was right to do what the heart thinks right and said it should be allowed to be worshipped. A chapel was built for the image. Soon afterwards an epidemic disease broke out. This was considered proof of the displeasure of the gods at the new worship. The chapel was reduced to ashes and the image thrown in the river. [From

a later chronicle, under the title Historical Survey, published in Ohosaka, 1795 AD, beginning at 661 BC, translated by von Siebold].”



“The temple of the Ikko-Seu at Yagami is hard to reach and remote from the road but I have been determined to see it for some time. The Ikko-Seu was the earliest Buddhist sect to arrive in Japan adopting elements from the native Sinto system, specifically those relating to purification. In this way they still retain the tradition that pure spring water must first be sieved through a muslin cloth before washing. Similarly if a person injures himself while building he must withdraw from the project. They share also a disdain for idols. No temple is so devoid of them. The colours are natural and unadorned, only stone flecked with pink, and the trammelled floor softened by endless prostration. A white bowl containing fire sits on a tall tripod. The wood, whatever it is, burns with a white flame, sometimes opaque, like woven raw silk, with the effect that the flame refracted on the cold walls is something quite mysterious. I sat on the ground for hours in this kind of reverie. I should add that the first principle of the Ikko-Seu is preservation of fire. It is the symbol of the Supreme God Amida, of purity and the instrument of purification.”

“After he had subjugated China in 1280 AD Ghengis Khan sent a letter to the Mikado: ‘Already philosophers desire to see the whole world form one family. But how may this one-family principle be carried into effect if friendly intercourse subsists not between the parties?’ Three times the Khan sent messages of peace, a peace confirming his omnipotence, and three times they were rebuffed by the Japanese. In the 5th month, the Kaou-le-Chinese fleet with 100,000 soldiers descended on the island of Iki in Western Japan. The Governor called for public prayers to be sent up to the Gods. The Mongol commander fell ill and a great typhoon dashed his ships on the rocks. Those troops who sought refuge on shore were slaughtered where they stood or marched to Fakota where they were imprisoned. The latter, numbering 30,000, were later put to the sword. Three were spared. They were sent back to Kublai Khan to tell him of the inexorable severity with which the law was administered in Dai Nippon. This accounts for the first and only attempted invasion of Dai Nippon” [From 14th century Encyclopaedia translated by Siebold]”



“It is no fever, and in the day I have no anxieties to speak of, but the same night visions repeat. The dream is always the same. I am in the temple bound to a chair though there are no ropes or physical ties on my body. I am dressed in a suit of reeds. The flame burns in the bowl and outside I can hear more fire. A man of authority- he must be the Mikado as he sits perfectly straight and wears a small, velvet cap- sits on a throne above me. His head does not move, his eyes are set dead ahead. Every so often a white screen is pulled in front of him so only his head is visible. When the screen is removed he is wearing new silks each time more vibrant than the last. He asks me if I have found the plant. I tell him I have the means if only he would let me return home. You have not found it, he says, it is here and you have not found it. You have lied. Then I know what will come and am filled with terror.

The white flame spills from the bowl. I struggle but the flames catch the reeds and I wake in a hot sweat and cannot breathe.”

“At 11 o’clock in the morning on the 22nd September, 1828 we were told a fire had broken out 2 leagues from where we have our lodging. We took no heed as fires are common and some of us have learnt to be familiar with them. But the flames came nearer and nearer, pushed by the seasonal wind which blows in the direction of the sun. At 2 o’clock we climbed to the roof and saw the conflagration closer than it had ever been and the destruction already wrought. We hurriedly packed our things. I was tense with fear. The cries recalled my dream which I had forgotten until then. I only packed a few things: the drawings given to me by Taki, a ball of hemp given me as a talisman and a pair of ornamental fans. Crossing the bridge the heat was great. To pass to the *Hara*, the open field where we had seen people fleeing for safety, we had to take an oblique angle towards the fire. We ran down a street that was beginning to burn. The houses burnt like kindling. The wind was up when we arrived at the field thick with flags of princes whose palaces had already been consumed. They gathered with their wives and children while others found their own corners to hide. We set up a camp with a flag made from an orange blanket one of the men had taken. It might have been entertaining until we found our first full view of the fire, and never did I see a thing so terrible. It swept over the whole land to the mountains, a sea of fire, nothing else. The horror was completed by the air, filled only with tortured cries and the lamentations of fugitive women and children not fast enough to escape. I did not sleep until the rains came in the morning. When I woke nothing remained but charred remains and a ghostly sequence of square, white buildings as tall as church spires. Until that moment I had imagined these perfect buildings to be the homes of fabulous princes, but I knew no home had survived the fire. Once it was safe to walk around - and no one was fit to notice me - I found the buildings to be reinforced with a six foot wall of clay and straw, finished with stone and a lime wash. None had any windows. The only entrance I could see was a small door some fifteen feet up above the ground, accessible only with a ladder. The buildings belong to individual families, common and well-founded alike. They are to house and preserve all treasured belongings from the persistent and frequent threat of fire.”



In 1828 Philipp von Siebold was put under house arrest and later expelled for possessing a series of detailed maps belonging to the court astronomer. Those associated with him were executed. In the Netherlands his vast collection of animals and plants, books, maps and objects, entitled ‘The von Siebold collection’, was purchased by the government and von Siebold appointed as ‘Advisor to the King on Japanese Affairs’. In 1859 he returned to Japan for four years. His demands for the ‘peaceful co-existence of different cultures’ was not appreciated by the Dutch authorities who recalled him against his will. Siebold returned to his native town of Wurzburg where he suffered from nostalgia and died.

He is remembered by the Siebold Memorial Museum in Nagasaki, the Siebold Museum in Wurzburg and Siebold Huis, his former home in central Leiden, now a museum of Japanese art and culture.