

An unpublished letter by Oscar Wilde

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AN UNPUBLISHED LETTER BY OSCAR WILDE¹

A previously unpublished letter by Oscar Wilde offers a new aphorism and sheds light on his impressions of illustrations of his verse. In December 1887, Oscar Wilde published two poems in The Lady's Pictorial, 'Le Panneau' and 'Les Ballons', each illustrated by J. Bernard Partridge (1861-1945), a young artist who would go on to be a frequent contributor to Punch. Among Wilde's published correspondence are two letters to Partridge. The first one is dated 24 September 1887 and outlines the task:

I send you two short poems, suitable for illustration. One is a suggestion for a design for a Japanese panel, the other is a description of children flying balloons in the Tuileries Gardens in Paris. They should be set on a full page, and around them and through them should be the decorative design. Perhaps, as the girl under the rose tree is Japanese, the children who are playing with the balloons should be Japanese also. They would give a unity to the composition. Round the verses of the first poem should be fluttering rose leaves, and round the verses of the second the balloons should float, the children holding the strings from the side of the page. Oscar Wilde.²

¹ With thanks to Merlin Holland for permission to reprint Wilde's unpublished letter, and to George Houle.

² Letter 'To Bernard Partridge', postmark 24 September 1887. *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart Davis (New York, 2000), 322.

The poems blur lines of national origin, with their French titles and, as Wilde's letter suggests, imagery redolent of deeply westernised japonisme. 'Le Panneau' invokes stereotypically Japanese symbols to make its setting clear: a 'little ivory girl' awaits her lover under a rose tree, her nails are the 'pale green' of 'polished jade'; her hair is 'raven'; singing on her 'amber lute', she is overheard by a 'silver crane' and her 'lover, with his almond eyes' (2). The setting of the second poem, 'Les Ballons', is not evident from its content, Wilde's mention of the Tuileries Garden notwithstanding.³

Partridge's rendering of 'Le Panneau' includes many of the objects mentioned in Wilde's poem—a crane, an 'amber lute', a 'blue bowl' on the ground—and he takes care to dress the 'little ivory girl' in a kimono, albeit it an ill fitted one. Her face, though, is markedly western, and while her hair is dark, it is styled in a typically 1880s British fashion, adorned with a rather on-the-nose small fan and crossed chopsticks. Her lover, perched in the illustration's background, is rendered with traditionally Japanese iconographic markers.

In his illustration for 'Les Ballons', Partridge again seems to have taken his cues from Wilde's poem, as opposed to Wilde's instructive letter. Of the eight figures depicted, none appears expressly Japanese. One young boy, seen from the back, wears a hat that could perhaps be a *sugegasa*, but could equally be a western flat cap or even a large beret. Another young girl, her attention focused on the balloon she holds, has black hair, a western bonnet à la mode, and features of indeterminate ethnicity. The central girl figure is clearly blond, in fashionable western clothing.

A hitherto unpublished letter from Wilde to Partridge seems to refer to this episode and these illustrations. Now in a private collection, the letter was acquired from Wilbur Smith, who

³³ As Wilde's Bibliographer Christopher Sclater Millard notes, the first stanza of 'Les Ballons' appears in a manuscript draft of the poem 'Le Jardin des Tuileries'. [Stuart Mason], *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde* (London, 1914), 103.

said it had belonged to his father, Paul Jordan-Smith. Jordan-Smith was a literary critic for and frequent contributor to the Los Angeles Times, where he routinely reviewed books on or about Oscar Wilde. The undated letter reads as follows:

My Dear Partridge—

It must be Japanese - in spite of the yellow hair. Poets like publicans and other sinners require a licence--at least they take one.

Yours,

Oscar Wilde

The jovial letter, almost certainly written after Wilde had seen the illustrations in proof or in print, seems to refer to the Lady's Pictorial illustrations, most probably that for 'Les Ballons'. Though Wilde had encouraged Partridge to depict the children chasing the balloons as Japanese, the artist used his licence. Wilde's own licence in declaring that blond hair was no definitive proof of ethnicity chimes with his free-wheeling pronouncements elsewhere on the Japanese. In his 1889 essay-in-dialogue, 'The Decay of Lying', Wilde has one of the speakers declare breezily that 'the Japanese people are [...] simply a mode of style, a whimsical fancy of art'.⁴ His turn of phrase equating poetic licence to that of the pub owner and other sinners is Wildean wit at its most representative.

Wilde's good humour towards Partridge seems to have persisted, as the artist illustrated a number of Wilde's other works, including 'The Young King' (Lady's Pictorial Christmas Number, 1888) and 'In the Forest' (Lady's Pictorial Christmas Number 1899). Partridge would also create famous caricatures of Wilde in Punch.

⁴ 'The Decay of Lying' Nineteenth Century (1889), 52.

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