

# Jack and Mary Hillier as I Remember Them

## A Very Personal Tribute

by Gina Collia

I remember my first visit to 'Hillcrest' to see the Hilliers as clearly as if it had been yesterday, even though it actually took place almost thirteen years ago. When we arrived in Mrs Hillier's car, after being picked up from Redhill Station, Mr Hillier was standing just outside the front entrance to their substantial Victorian house. It was a cold, wet day in February, and, as we shuffled along the path up to the front door, he reached out his hand to take mine and then kissed my cheek. I was only seventeen years old at the time, and authors were akin to movie stars to a bibliophile like myself, so I had been tremendously nervous during the four-and-a-half-hour journey down to Surrey with my then boyfriend (now husband). As we sat down to lunch, I hardly dared pick up a fork for fear that our hosts would see that my hands were shaking, but we were all soon talking and laughing, and any lingering formality quickly disappeared; it was as if we had all known each other for years. I had no idea at the time that one visit would lead to many more and that the correspondence which had begun five months previously would continue for the next thirteen years. In all that time, though, despite countless attempts to have me call them Jack and Mary, my admiration, respect and immense fondness for them both would never allow me to call them anything other than Mr and Mrs Hillier.

In the years that followed, we would correspond regularly and visit them at their home, or on occasion we would meet Mr Hillier at the British Museum if there was a particular exhibition that he wanted me to see. He would regularly suggest relevant reading matter but would always remind me that frequent access to the prints themselves was of the utmost importance. Whilst planning a visit to the British Museum to view the prints of Kitagawa Utamaro he wrote, 'there is no substitute for the originals; photographs can tell you something, but to really understand the full extent of the artistry, both of Utamaro and the woodblock-cutters and printers, you have to have the prints under your eyes, close at hand.'

Sometimes, Mr Hillier would apologise for having retired from 'active service', as he put it, because the books he needed to answer my never-ending stream of questions were no longer at the house, having been transferred to the British Museum in the autumn of 1988. At that time, he wrote, 'at 76 I am happy to leave matters to the newcomers in the field, like yourself!' Despite the fact that he sometimes referred to walking about the place with a large sign saying 'retired' around his neck, he was always active; he remained so until the very end. I once inquired as to the number of works he had written, and in the letter that came in reply, below a typewritten list of published works, he wrote, 'I like to count the hundred or so catalogues that I made of Japanese print, book and painting sales for Sotheby's while I was their consultant from 1953-1978, but they are never registered as "publications" in the general sense of the word.' One such group of catalogues which *were* published, however, were those devoted to the sale of the Henri Vever collection, of which Mr and Mrs Hillier always expressed great pride.

We would often discuss Mr Hillier's beginnings in the field of Japanese art history and his first attempts at getting his work published, often due to my own premature ambitions in the same direction. I sometimes sent short articles for him to read, and he would respond with constructive criticism and advice in an attempt to bring me down to earth, 'without pouring cold water on [my] ambitions.' He once wrote, in a letter which followed one of my early submissions, 'When I was your age, or even younger, I tried my hand at writing pieces for the art magazines, on Western artists then, because I was not drawn to Japanese art until after the war. None of them were published. I have kept a few, and, re-reading them now, I can see that they betray my immaturity.'

When I purchased my very first double-page book illustration by Hokusai for the meagre sum of eighteen pounds, I sent a photocopy of my prized possession to Mr Hillier immediately. By return of post, I received a package containing two of Utamaro's illustrated books, *Ehon yomogi no shima* (1794) and *Ehon azuma asobi* (1790), and a letter within which was written, 'As you are prepared to start collecting, very sensibly, with humble pages from books, I offer as encouragement fragments of two *ehon* by Utamaro.' I was overwhelmed by his generosity. Following close behind, there came another package, this time containing a copy of the privately published book of his own exceptional woodcuts, *A Selection of Wood-Engravings 1933-1987* (Chimera Press, 1991), about which he wrote, 'This year (which is my 80th), I am having something of an "ego-trip" by privately publishing a book of my own wood-engravings. I have had the benefit of a very factual autobiographical foreword which will at least leave my record straight!'

As the years passed, the contents of our letters moved towards more personal aspects of our lives and further away from the subjects which had once occupied every line. I would send handmade greeting cards, drawings and paintings, and I would receive Mr Hillier's wonderful cards, decorated with his own woodcuts, some of which had been made more than forty years earlier.

I had been aware of Mr Hillier's ill health and Mrs Hillier's worsening arthritis for some time, but he would always make light of it, not wanting me to worry about them. He sometimes wrote that they had both of them been struggling a bit, but he insisted that it was 'mostly just *anno domini*, but to use the well-worn cliché: we shouldn't complain...' When I received the news of Mr Hillier's death in 1995, I, like so many others who knew and loved him, was overcome by an immense feeling of sadness and an overwhelming sense of loss.

When I visited Mrs Hillier, later that year, she showed me the many letters she'd received, paying tribute to Mr Hillier's great kindness and the importance of his contribution to the world of Japanese art history. During the many visits that followed, we would talk of the many happy years they had spent together, look through old photographs, and sometimes we would look through the letters that Mr Hillier had sent to Mrs Hillier throughout their separation during the war years. We would often talk of their first meeting and of the early years of their marriage, when the children were

young. In one letter, following my announcement that I intended to marry, she wrote of her wedding day, 'I had made myself a jacket of green corduroy - my favourite colour. So everyone said "unlucky"... "marry in May, rue the day," and other foreboding remarks. I think it was one of the luckiest days of my life, and Jack laughed and said, "you cost seven shillings and sixpence... what a bargain!" (that was the fee then).'

On the evening of 14 February 1999, the sad news came that Mrs Hillier had passed away after suffering a stroke.

No one who knew them will forget them, ever.

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This article first appeared as 'Jack and Mary Hillier as I remember them: A very personal tribute' in *Andon* 65, the journal of the Society for Japanese Arts, April 2000. Some alterations to the text have been made to correct publisher errors.