



## 美 (Bi) : Beauty

Many years of dealing with beautiful Japanese objects have imperceptibly wrought a change upon our senses and altered our European view of the quest for Beauty. In this first Newsletter of the year 2014, marking the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of *Dentsdelion Antiques* in the heart of the old Shitamachi district in Tokyo, we would like to share our experience of what Japanese collectors and Beauty seekers are usually looking for and how they experience this journey. First we will undertake an apophatic approach to Japanese aesthetics by recalling Western aesthetic concepts, as our understanding of Japanese aesthetics can be compared to a slow unravelling of what we had taken for granted prior to coming to Japan three decades ago.

In Europe, the concept of an individual artist or creator in search of an ideal Beauty can be traced back to Plato. During the European Middle Age though, “art” was simply understood as the mastery of a technique (Lat. *ars* = “craft” or “skill”), with a distinction drawn between the Liberal Arts as purely intellectual (rhetoric, grammar, dialectic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music) and the Mechanical Arts that transform matter, including the Beaux Arts (architecture, sculpture and painting) and those overseen by Guilds (masons, carpenters, carvers, glass workers and many trade guilds). That distinction is based on the concept of separation between mind and body, subject and object, with the intellectual activities being perceived as more “noble” than the manual. With the Renaissance, the concept of the individual artist was affirmed, as creators were legitimated by the signing of their work, and it was then that painters and sculptors sought to be considered as apart from the Mechanical arts, because their production was supposedly more intellectual than “mechanical”. From that pretention came the lasting duality between “noble” fine arts (architecture, sculpture and painting), and applied or decorative arts, often relegated to secondary status.

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the advent of industrial production, the discovery of photography and cinema, and the emergence of Conceptual arts in which creation had to convey a message, the ancient schematic classification of “arts” lost a part of its lustre, but the original idea of separating



Kakejiku (screen roll) representing the poetess Ise (伊勢 872-938) and her poem : "I will wait at Miwa, even if I know nobody comes...". Combining poesy, calligraphy and painting in one production is considered a supreme realization of art in the Orient. Anonymous painting, Edo era.



Bento : This lunch box is a common lunch meal. Still, it will satisfy our eyes as well as our taste buds.

intellectual and manual production was perpetuated. This carried with it a vague hierarchy, Literature and Music being superior to Painting and Sculpture and ceramic or any “crafted” production placed at the bottom.

Such an anthropomorphic binary vision of mind versus body has its limits; it leaves aside the sensibility of the heart as if “art” could be a simple mental act, but has also the major flaw of being euro-centred and awkward at grasping other cultures’ productions, such as calligraphy, a combination of poetry and painting considered an Art Royal in Japan and China. Even with its flaws, an intellectual, dualistic concept of fine/applied arts is perpetuated today in the binary distinction of what is “Art” and what is just “craftsmanship” (*artisanat*), or even more radically between what is art and what is not art.

One might wonder when arriving in Japan why some train stations display Ikebana, why the smallest present is wrapped in the most sophisticated manner, why money is handled in envelopes rather than hand to hand, why the waves of Japanese cherry-tree blossoming are reported on national television, why the most humble lunch box is presented in the most stylish manner and, speaking of food, why a classic Japanese restaurant is so aesthetically-centred compared to other high-end restaurants internationally.

This insertion of aesthetic sensibilities into every part of life comes from the distant past. The *Tale of Genji* (源氏物語), written by the Lady Murasaki Shikibu (紫式部) in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, is not only the first novel of the world, it is also an instruction manual in the aesthetic sense of Japanese chivalry, in which we learn the elevation of aestheticism as a way of life. In such a world, the inability to choose the right paper, the right shade of black ink, the right fragrance or the right flower accompanying a calligraphed love poem was an irremediable “*faute de goût*”. Beauty as an everyday experience goes back in Japan as long as literature, if not before. It can be found in everything; a gesture, the wind, a knot cord around a tree, the sound of a frog jumping in a pond... Not theorized, Beauty evolves around a few intuitive ideas that we will try to describe.

### **Yûgen (幽玄) or the art of suggesting elegance**

One of the main features of Japanese aesthetics is suggestion. The food-picture created by a lunch box, the impermanent blossoming of cherry-trees or an ink painting are suggesting a disposition or mood. As symbols, they are not coldly conveying a message, but implying the vague sense of an idea that would lose its form if one tried to put it into words. *Yûgen*<sup>1</sup>, a subtle aesthetic concept that was already present in the Heian culture, was used as a term by Zeami Motokiyo (世阿弥 元清 1364-1444) to isolate the ideal form of Beauty at the core of Nô drama. *Yûgen*, literally meaning “diffuse - mysterious” is never clearly defined but a helpful description was written by the Zen monk Shôtetsu (正徹 1381-1459) in his *Shôtetsu-monogatari* (正徹物語): *[Yûgen’s] quality may be suggested by the sight of a thin*



Ikebana display at Kyoto station. Flower arrangements, not as remarkable as this one, are often seen in modest train stations all over Japan.

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive description of the *yûgen*, see Andrew T. Tsubaki, *Zeami and the Transition of the concept of Yûgen: A note on the Japanese aesthetic*. Journal of Aesthetic and Art criticism, XXX/1, Fall 1971.

cloud veiling the moon or by autumn mist swathing the scarlet leaves on a mountainside. If one is asked where in these sights lies the *yûgen*, one cannot say, and it is not surprising that a man who fails to understand this truth is likely to prefer the sight of a perfectly clear, cloudless sky.

Sometime roughly translated as “elegance” or “grace”, *yûgen* suggests that Beauty is easier to apprehend than to express in words, maybe because it only touches the deepest part of one's heart, or maybe because we are not used to differentiating between aesthetic subtleties. In *Nô* drama it might be an actor expressing impatience without words or obvious signs of his feelings, in the most restrained way. But *Yûgen* might also convey a kind of aristocratic refinement which finds its origin in the court culture of Heian, as described in *Genji*. As the political power shifted from the Kyoto aristocracies to the military power under the Edo shogunate during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of *yûgen* evolved into that of *sabi* (寂び). It is not easy to distinguish one from the other, but *yûgen* is sometimes charged with nostalgia for a time of lost glory<sup>2</sup>, or decadence, while *sabi* is concerned with simplicity to the point of nothingness, or *mu* (無)<sup>3</sup>, perhaps an earthier ideology evoking the rural origins of the warrior class. The awareness of *sabi* was developed by the poet Bashô (松尾芭蕉 1644-1694). Before that, however, the concept of *wabi* was expounded by Sen no Rikyû (千利休, 1522-1591).

### **Wabi (侘び), or the elegance of simplicity**

Rikyû helped construct *cha-dô*, the Way of Tea, an integration of Zen values with many Japanese traditional arts, including painting, architecture, ceramic, lacquer, landscaping, dressing codes, and incense and food preparation. Raised in a rich family of the wealthy merchant city of Sakai, Rikyû felt keenly the futility of the life of opulence. As a *cha-dô* Master with Zen monastic experience, he developed a “Way of Tea” based on humility, starting with the design of a simple hut for a Tea room. This had 2 or 3 mats with a low door that forced samurai to abandon their swords outside, bend over to get in, and seat themselves informally without consideration for rank. This aesthetic concept Rikyû developed has come to be part of *wabi*. *Wabi* refers to the elegance of simplicity extrapolated to the point of poverty, and also solitude. For *cha-dô*, or simply “*wabi-cha*” (*wabi-tea*), Rikyû recommended the use of the most basic utensils, foods or cloths, Beauty being more apparent in poverty than in the luxury and elegance of the Heian aristocrats or the idle warriors who tried to imitate them<sup>4</sup>. This

synthesis of art and religion was taking place in the upmost humility, recalling the commonness of human life, as Rikyû states in a famous poem:

*The essence of the tea ceremony  
Is simply to boil water,  
To make tea,  
And to drink it – nothing more!  
But sure you know this.*



“Old pond - frogs jumped in - sound of water”.

Translation by Lafcadio Hearn of Bashô's famous haiku  
“古池や蛙飛びこむ水の音”.

Bronze vase showing a frog under a willow tree. Meiji era.

<sup>2</sup> With a previous shift from imperial to military power during Kamakura bakufu (1192-1333).

<sup>3</sup> Tsubaki explain *sabi* by an evolution of *yûgen* to which the Buddhist concept of *mu* is added.

<sup>4</sup> Samurai were mostly unoccupied after the unification of the country by the Togugawa shogun dynasty at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

### ***Sabi, or frugal impermanence***

Perhaps in reaction to the extreme frugality exhorted by Rikyû, *sabi* as defined by Bashô might be the reintroducing of joy in everyday life, even though that life is impermanent. *Sabi* usually refers to the awareness of the impermanence of things. It evokes the corrosion of *sabi* (rust) but also the solitude of detachment as in *sabishii* (lonely or desolation). It is an aesthetic translation of the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence, and perhaps a reference to the immanent tragedy of human life.

Wabi-sabi as a combined concept is often used to describe the *châ-do* aesthetic of frugality and impermanence, and by extension, a kind of melancholic state of mind.

But Japanese aesthetics cannot be summarized as nothing more than poverty or melancholy, they are also the product of a communion, of a perspective in which the context is at least as important as the object, as the famous haiku of the poet and tea master Murata Shuko (珠光 1422–1502) puts it:

*A fine horse,  
Standing by a straw-thatched house,  
Is a very beautiful scene.*

### **Quintessence**

An 18<sup>th</sup> century Nabeshima porcelain or a, high grade Wajima lacquer do not easily fit with the frugality expressed by *wabi-sabi*. They aim at perfection, and can be considered as the utmost expression of technical excellence with the simplest materials, and one might find some arrogance in defying the improbable in taming a thick and sticky resin used for lacquer ware<sup>5</sup>, the primitive techniques of uphill wooden kilns to control the temperature and atmosphere necessary to get perfect colours and crisp designs in an underglaze blue porcelain, or melting iron sand and folding the metal to make the strongest steel ever created for the forging of swords.

This aim for perfection involving a high level of complexity and methodologies creates a contrast with the simplicity sought by Sen no Rikyû. But Rikyû never implied simplicity as a shortcut to Beauty. In fact, reaching simplicity can be a lengthy process, as seen in the raku ware technique. Sponsored by Rikyû, Raku ware, a hand moulded and lead glazed type of pottery very much appreciated by Western ceramicists, is often understood as a firing technique in which chance is the driving force and the novice could do as well as the master potter. In fact, playing with chance is the lot of any human production; the porcelain ceramist never has the assurance that his bowl will not sag when fired at 1200°, nor the carver that his block of wood or stone will not reveal a flaw during the process of sculpture. A piece of raku ware as conceived of by Rikyû must attain an ideal of humility, so a raku chef d'oeuvre is simplicity at its highest pitch, the quintessence of simplicity. That quintessence has been sought in architecture, in poetry, in ironwork, in theatre, in landscaping, in cooking... in any medium but always with restraint. As a constraining factor, humble materials are favoured (gold and silver have seldom been worked although the country has exported these precious metals for



Kôgô (insence box) in *takamakie* (raised lacquer) on a *nashiji* (pear skin) background. Motif of a pair of *Mikawa Manzai* actors. Lacquer, gold and silver, late Edo period.

<sup>5</sup> See Vol. XII.IV of our Newsletter about lacquer ware.

centuries), and hand manufacture is preferred even if perfection could be better attained with machinery.

But even in the case of an overly gaudy piece of lacquerware or porcelain that is too shiny, which have escaped the restraints of the *wabi-sabi* canon of Beauty as individual objects, their use in context can redeem them, as Tanizaki Junichirô (谷崎潤一郎 1886-1965) notes in this passage of *In Praise of Shadows*:

*Darkness is an indispensable element in the beauty of lacquerware... Sometimes a superb piece of black lacquerware, decorated perhaps with flecks of silver and gold – a small case or a low desk or a set of shelves – will seem to me unsettlingly garish and altogether vulgar. But render pitch black the void in which they stand, and light them not with the rays of the sun or electricity but rather a single lantern or candle: suddenly those garish objects turn sombre, refined, and dignified. Artisans of old, when they finished their works in lacquer and decorated them in sparkling patterns, must have had in mind dark rooms and sought to turn to good effect what feeble light there was.*

## Communion

Japanese Beauty, based on suggestion, as we have seen, is not simply the creation of objects to be admired. An Indian ink sketch of a simple branch can symbolise cherry trees. Buds are enough to suggest their full bloom, and that suggestion is considered best as it lets one imagine a perfect blooming that does not happen every year<sup>6</sup>. For this to happen, it requires some involvement from the spectator, sharing mores, imaginative elements and sensibilities with regard to the medium used. That affinity for suggested, discreet beauty, explains why Tanizaki recommends shade over bright light, as a lacquer box is most at ease in a simple home, blending with its owner's other possessions. It was not created as an "objet d'art" for the purpose of being exposed to bright light in a glass case. Instead, it was made to enchant its owner without intimidating, almost hiding its beauty under the pretext of everyday usage. Its beauty flows naturally from the communion between the skilled artisans<sup>7</sup> who put all their souls into its making, and the owner or his guest who apprehends it through the lens of his own experiences, his own regard, and his own imperfections. It is a "sensual" communion, as both the producer and the spectator have to develop their sensitivity in order to search for the quintessence of refinement of that lacquer box.



Be it a bronze *korô* (incense-burner), an Imari cup, a Satsuma vase, a *funa-dansu*<sup>8</sup> or an Indian ink drawing, in order to "feel" the depth of sensibility of the caster, the ceramist, the ebonist or the painter who has put all his experience, all his wisdom in his "chef-d'oeuvre", we have to imagine how that object was made, somehow "deconstruct" it and follow a reverse path to its creation. The object has most likely caught our attention from a distance because we have recognised something we share with the artisan, some of his culture, or a universal

Imari (aikutani type), mid 17<sup>th</sup> century. Motive of cut paper in underglaze blue, red enamels, silver and gold. Asymmetry falls into the quest for humble suggestiveness rather than for an intimidating perfection.

<sup>6</sup> A consequence of this affection for suggestion rather than for demonstration might be shyness from symmetry. A geometric French garden has no aesthetic significance in Japan since it does not leave enough space for imagination. A rock garden on the other hand, with unpolished stones and moths, keeps the spectator's imagination floating for ever ...

<sup>7</sup> Several types of « métiers » are required, as described in Vol. XII.IV of our Newsletter about lacquer ware.

<sup>8</sup> See Vol XIII.IV of our Newsletter about *funa-dansu* used by Japanese sailors.

sensibility. Getting closer, we start a process of deconstruction of that object with various senses including sight, touch, hearing and even smell. We will wonder and admire how it was designed and built, how much skill and finesse, ingenuity and intuition the artisan has called upon to solve the numerous physical and technical challenges of transforming raw materials, metal, kaolin, clay, wood, lacquer, earth pigments... into a precious object. It is a gentle, sensual voyage, scrutinizing details, caressing surfaces, feeling softness and roughness, probing reflections of light and transparency, checking resonance, tracking man-made and natural patinas, aging wear or imperfections due to the ultimate artisan's painful surrender to factors beyond human control... And through this sensuous, almost voluptuous travel, we will engage with that object's history, and ultimately communicate with its creator, who undertook a similar journey but in the reverse direction, starting with raw materials. And the experience does not end there, for Beauty for the Japanese connoisseur is not static but it develops within its own context. In using an object, one contributes to its wear, its tarnishing and its ever-renewing beauty, as Tanizaki explains:

*While we do sometimes indeed use silver for teakettles, decanters, or sake cups, we prefer not to polish it. On the contrary, we begin to enjoy it only when the lustre has worn off, when it has begun to take on a dark, smoky patina.*

As a conclusion to this humble essay attempting to define the ever-changing idea of Beauty, evolving historically, geographically, and developing with our sensibility, we can testify that as we grow more skilled at tracking Beauty, wherever it might be found, we select the objects of our environment with the utmost care, insensible to fashion or mimicry, their Beauty undoubtedly influencing our mood. What could be more valuable in life?



Netsuke of Daruma (Edo period). "... we begin to enjoy it only when the lustre has worn off, when it has begun to take on a dark, smoky patina..." Tanizaki Junichirô.