

Aesthetic Relating to the Japanese Mind

Final Paper

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INTRODUCTION

Looking at Japanese traditional and modern culture, it is evident that Japanese people have a unique sense of what they consider to be beautiful and tasteful. Aesthetic values do not solely represent the appearance of an object, but most importantly it is the appreciation for the creation of said object. It is acknowledging that the process is just as equally significant as the end product. This particular aesthetic is something that I am curious about because I am currently working on my senior Capstone Project where I compare American and Japanese university students' personal style and how it reflects the values of their society. Through some of the research that I had previously conducted, I was surprised by how complex aesthetic values are in Japan and how much it is influenced by more traditional factors such as Shinto and Buddhism which emphasizes the wholeness of nature and character ethics. Japanese people may not consider themselves to be religious, but it is difficult to deny the fact that religion plays a major role in their daily lives, even if it is just subconsciously. Although there are many parts to Japanese aesthetic, the four main characteristics are said to be “suggestion, irregularity, simplicity, and perishability” (Hume, 1995). I chose to focus on the topics of wabi-sabi, geido, and kawaii: wabi-sabi and kawaii are particular ideals on appearance and behavior, while geido focuses more on the appreciation for that which was created by hand. While the three topics I chose all relate to a form of style, they also all relate to a particular way of thinking which is what I believe is so special about Japanese aesthetic. In my paper I will look into how the four characteristics can be found in Japanese aesthetic, what has influenced this aesthetic, and how has it changed in order to be more appropriate for modern Japan. Through answering these three questions, I hope to identify how exactly aesthetic values relates to the Japanese mind.

WABI-SABI

Wabi-sabi is the complex idea of finding beauty in everything that is not considered to be conventionally beautiful. This is in direct contrast to the more Western idea of beauty which is based on the ancient Greek's appreciation of perfection in beauty. The "wabi" in wabi-sabi stands for "rustic simplicity" and "sabi" is the beauty of something that has been used (Richardson, 2016). Wabi-sabi has its own particular characteristics which are "impermanence, asymmetry, humility, and imperfection" (Hume, 1995). While wabi-sabi is found in many aspects of Japanese life, it is most evident in Japan's relationship with nature and literature. Even now, the concept of wabi-sabi can still be found in modern, urban Japan although what it comes to represent has changed slightly.

Found In Nature

Japan is one of the few countries in the world that has weather which actually changes greatly depending on the season. Each season the weather changes drastically which affects Japan's nature as well. The scenery only lasts for a maximum of a few months which is why so many Japanese people appreciate nature so much. This relates to one of the four characteristics of Japanese aesthetic, perishability. As soon as the season passes, it is impossible to see that same scene until another year. The best example of this sense of fragility are cherry blossoms which are usually only in full-bloom for at most two weeks. During these short two weeks, many Japanese people go to parks in groups for Hanami (flower viewing) to appreciate the temporary beauty of these flowers. Knowing that the flowers will fall so soon adds to their charm and is what makes them so special as opposed to other flowers which can be seen year-round.

Not always is wabi-sabi found directly in nature, but often it is caused by natural elements such as the sun or the moon. Another fitting example of wabi-sabi are shadows and how the beauty of nature can be identified through suggestion, which is one of the main four

characteristics of Japanese aesthetic. Imagine seeing an image of a traditional Japanese room with a traditional paper door facing the outside. Through this paper door all you simply see is the shadow of a tree's outline, but just from looking at that image you can infer that it was taken sometime in autumn or winter. Why is that? Perhaps the tree's shadow indicated that the branches were barren or maybe the overall feeling of the room gave you sensation that it was taken in either of those times.

Found in Haiku

Haiku are poems which are written in the 5 syllable, 7 syllable, and 5 syllable format. These have been written since a long time ago, and would often be used to express the author's feelings regarding a spot in nature that they had visited. In these nature haikus, the author writes in a way in which the reader will be able to understand the beauty of the area and hopefully be an incentive for them to visit it themselves. Because haiku have such a limited writing style, it is beneficial for authors to make the most of their words and write with as much emotion as possible within the strict rules. This aspect of Japanese culture once again aligns with the characteristic of suggestion as it is often necessary for the reader to interpret the haiku as they see fit. One of these famous haikus was written by the one of the most well-known poets from the Edo period:

“Poverty's child-
he starts to grind the rice,
and gazes at the moon.”

By simply reading that short haiku, the reader quickly empathizes with the poor boy who is grinding this rice at night. Putting themselves in the boy's shoes, the reader imagines the sense of smallness which that child must be feeling at that moment.

Modern Wabi-Sabi Ideals

Although wabi-sabi is a concept which appreciates that which is old and has character, it is still an idea that can be found even in the most urban of the Japanese cities, Tokyo. Despite the fact that it still exists, what ideas it represents have changed and there is debate as to which of the many possible definitions it corresponds to. The two most debated between of these definitions are the idea of being minimalistic and utilitarian. While minimalism aligns more with simplicity and sleekness, utilitarian focuses on the practicality of an item as opposed to its appearance. However, the latter better represents the original meaning of wabi-sabi because the former is known as one of the most expensive styles of decor. As a result of the high prices, minimalism cannot truly be considered to be wabi-sabi as it does not contain the aspect of humility which is necessary.

GEIDO

Another aspect of Japanese culture in which the aesthetic values are evident in is Geido, or Japanese arts disciplines such as tea ceremony, pottery, and calligraphy. In Geido, the finished product is not necessarily the most important rather the process of creation is what is celebrated the most. This relates to Japanese values as many of the traditional practices celebrate the means in which something was done rather than simply the final result. It has an ethical and aesthetic connotation. Because geido portrays the way of thinking for many Japanese people, as they tend to not take any shortcuts as they find fulfillment in the actual act of doing as well.

Tea Ceremony (Sado)

Japanese traditional tea ceremony can be considered to be one of the best examples of geido, as the ritual to make the matcha tea is complicated and time-consuming. The process is straining for both the drinker and the tea-brewer as there are specific rules which must be

followed. The tea ceremony takes place in a traditional Japanese tatami room and where there is no chairs and everyone sits on the floor. The person brewing the matcha tea wears a traditional kimono as she prepares the tea for her guests. As the tea brewer is making it, the guests watch every one of their graceful movements which they must have practiced hundreds of times in order to look so perfect. This is another charm of the aesthetic as it is during this moment that the intensive training of the tea ceremony is the most evident. Even after the matcha tea has finally been completed, one does not drink from the cup presented to them right away. All of the tools which were used in the ceremony were chosen with careful thought and consideration, and for this reason they must be appreciated first. Japanese tea ceremony is not simply about being presented tea, but it is the appreciation for the discipline in which an individual went through in order to simply beautifully serve tea similar to an art form.

Pottery (Yakimono)

The cup that was used in the tea ceremony is also another fitting example for the idea of geido in Japanese society. While at times the “Japanese-style” cups may seem simply old and age, the fact that the cup shows personality and character is what makes it desirable. Japanese people admire items which clearly show heavy wear-and-tear because it shows how much it was loved by its owner. Also, potters use natural materials like clay to make these products look as natural as possible. Their goal is not to create something which is perfect because it is undesirable to be perfect. Often the pottery is made using many different textures and natural colors to show how much of an irregular piece it is. This idea stems from the Zen idea which “embraces imperfections” and the humility in acknowledging that humans are not perfect beings (Juniper, 2003).

Their admiration for that which is imperfect even goes as far as finding charm in that which has broken. The practice of kintsugi, which is melding broken pottery with gold proves that even that which is shattered can become something beautiful (Thy, 2015). While the pottery may indeed be beautiful, kintsugi is a form of Japanese art which has religious connotations as well as it reminds people of perishability and how beauty comes from suffering.

Calligraphy (Shodo)

Japanese calligraphy is another art form which represents the Japanese aesthetic that celebrates discipline in the creation of art. Again asymmetry is not a desirable quality in Japanese calligraphy as it does not express the artist's emotions or feelings. Cursive is the ideal writing style because it is very free-flowing and not at all symmetrical. Zen buddhism is also significant because it is necessary to clear one's mind in order to. Also, kanji has so many deep and complex meaning so the way in which it is written can also add to the significance of the piece. For example, if the kanji for winter (fuyu) is written with a light, almost shaky hand, it gives off a different image as opposed to if it were written dark and bold. It is for this reason that suggestion is so important in calligraphy, as the artist is able to express so much emotion through just ink and paper. While an individual is able to choose to interpret that however they may want to because of how broad calligraphy could be.

KAWAII

One of the most recent and most popular forms of Japanese aesthetic has been the concept of "kawaii." While in English we do not have a direct translation, the meaning closely resembles something akin to "cute" or "lovable" (Rattner, 2016). The concept of kawaii began in the 1970s and was used to describe an emerging bubble-writing style that was popular with the high school girls at the time (Rattner, 2016). Now kawaii is much more than just a word that

describes handwriting, and it is used to in describing appearance or behavior. In being kawaii, one embraces neat and cute traits rather than the more Western traits of beautiful and refined. This aligns with the characteristics of simplicity and irregularity found in the Japanese mind's aesthetic sense.

Kawaii Character Design

All over Japan, “kawaii” characters can be seen as mascots for schools, companies, transportation, and even cities. These cute characters align with the Japanese sense of aesthetic because all of them are simple in design, often have irregular characteristics, and usual use some form of suggestion to indicate what they represent. One of the most important aspects of creating a kawaii character is having a simple silhouette while also being asymmetrical. The reason that asymmetry is so important is because that which is perfect does not stand out or is memorable in any way. In order to be considered to be kawaii, a character must not be too detailed so that it still retains it's cute demeanor. However, because the design needs to be simple it is often difficult to come up with ideas that are not too simple so that they are forgettable yet too detailed that they lose their cuteness (Creative Bloq Staff, 2014). The hard work that goes into creating this design is also another part of the Japanese mind, as they do not mind investing tremendous amount of time and energy without needing to get all of the acknowledgment or praise for their work.

Idols and Kawaii Concept

Japanese idols are another perfect example which showcases Japanese people's unique value of aesthetic. The reason why Japanese idols are so popular is because they are highly relatable despite the fact that they are celebrities. These girls who are popular are not necessarily beautiful per se but they are simply just cute. Cute in normal, simple way which makes it easier

for their fans to feel a sense of closeness to them. If the girl were perfect, it would make their fans feel uncomfortable interacting with them since their appearance is intimidating. For this reason, there are some Japanese women will intentionally create an irregularity such as “yaeba” or snaggleteeth. Yaeba are imperfect teeth that give a woman a more “kawaii” imagine because they add a unique charm to her appearance. There are some cases in which women with naturally straight teeth undergo a procedure in order to create this appearance. This proves how significant the idea of “irregularity” is in all aspects of Japanese life.

Modern Kawaii

Similar to the concept of wabi-sabi, the idea of what is considered to be “kawaii” has changed considerably throughout the last few years. While it used to be a straightforward concept, the idea of kawaii has merged with recent trends while still retaining a semblance of the old meaning. One of these new forms of kawaii is kimo-kawaii which is a mix of the Japanese words “kimochi warui” and “kawaii” (B, 2013). What this means is that something can be ugly or unsettling, while still being cute. An example of this type of kawaii characters are the Kobitodukan characters which are designed to look like little living things in plant/flower costumes (B, 2013). While these character may seem ugly to some, they follow the basic design characteristics of being simple and irregular. Their basic silhouette and design would be easy to duplicate, yet there is something unique about it as well.

CONCLUSION

Through this paper, I discovered how a unique sense of aesthetic relates to the Japanese mind and how it influences their thoughts and behavior. Japan’s sense of aesthetics are made up by the following four characteristics: simplicity, irregularity, perishability, and suggestion. All four of those characteristics were found in the three aspects of Japanese aesthetics that I chose to

cover. For wabi-sabi, the most significant characteristics were the ideas of perishability and suggestion. Nature is always changing and the scenery only remain for short moments in time, while something such as haiku is heavily reliant on the reader to interpret the poem in their own way. In geido, it was simplicity and suggestion that were most closely related in ideals. Simplicity because craftsmen put a lot of effort into making their products seem simple and effortless, while in reality the effortless is difficult to create. Meanwhile, it also represents suggestion because the simplicity in the craftwork forces individual's to look deeper for more thoughtful meanings behind the pieces. Lastly, the characteristics of simplicity irregularity best describe kawaii factors related to the Japanese aesthetic. That which is considered to be simple looking and not so perfect-looking is the most ideal when it comes to cute in Japan.

Japan's sense of aesthetic has many influences but the most evident is definitely shinto and buddhism. These religious believes can be found interposed within all art forms in Japanese culture, and it also relates to how Japanese people appreciate art. By looking at nature and within one's self for beauty, one does not come to rely on others for that sense of fulfillment. Also because many religion is so engrained into Japanese people's lives, they themselves are not aware of what a significant influence it is. Now that Japanese people are being influenced from foreign countries and incorporating new values of aesthetic into their own, a whole new aesthetic sense is being created that mixes these traditional and modern values. Japanese aesthetic is complex and contains many intriguing layers which help shape Japan's society, and in turn the mind of Japanese people as well.

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