

I. SOME JAPANESE LANDSCAPES

Japanese Aesthetics

ALMOST ANY general statement made about Japanese aesthetics can easily be disputed and even disproved by citing well-known contrary examples. *Shibui*, the one term of Japanese aesthetics that seems to have found its way into the English language, evokes the understatement and refinement typical of much Japanese artistic expression; but how should this ideal be reconciled with the flamboyance of a performance of Kabuki or with the garish, polychromed temples at Nikkō, long considered by the Japanese themselves as a summit of beauty? It goes without saying that Japanese taste did not stay frozen throughout the centuries, nor were aesthetic preferences unaffected by social class and education, and in making general remarks about Japanese aesthetics these cautions must be remembered. Nevertheless, for all the exceptions that might be adduced, I believe it is possible to say of certain aesthetic ideals that they are characteristically and distinctively Japanese.

A few generalizations probably can be made without fear of contradiction. First of all, one might mention the importance of aesthetic considerations even in seemingly irrelevant areas of Japanese life. Despite the modernization and the internationalization of standards today, the visitor to Japan never fails to notice the flowers, real or artificial, clustered in a little holder near the bus driver's head; or the flowers gracefully bending down from a wall-bracket over the toilet; or the artistically brushed signboard in the railway station which proves to mean "Left Luggage Room"; or, for that matter, the maddening artistry with which a parcel is likely to be wrapped in a department store when one is in a hurry. These sights surprise the visitor, who marvels that aestheticism should be so pervasive, but he might equally wonder, of course, why buses, toilets and left luggage rooms in his own country are not considered the appropriate places for floral or calligraphic embellishment. Or, to take the most famous instance of all, the exquisite appearance of Japanese food, despite its often pallid taste, has been praised by every foreign visitor;

indeed, a meal served in the private room of a fine restaurant, where every detail from the color of the cushions on the *tatami* and the flower in the alcove to the last little sauce dish has been artistically planned, tends to make the occasion an aesthetic, rather than a gustatory experience. One has only to know how a first-rate Chinese dinner would be served in Djakarta today or in Shanghai in bygone years to become aware of the special place of aestheticism in Japanese life, as contrasted with other countries of Asia.

These examples may seem facetious, but however trivial they should suggest how important is the role played in daily Japanese life today of aesthetic preferences that go back very far in Japanese history. Descriptions in the works of fiction of a thousand years ago, as well as the diaries and essays, plainly indicate how absorbed the Japanese were with considerations of beauty. The European knight wore his lady's glove in his helmet, but it would not have occurred to him to examine the glove first to make sure it met his aesthetic standards and confirmed his judgment that his lady was worth dying for; he was quite content to think that the glove had once graced her hand, and an overly fastidious examination of the material, color, pattern and so on would not have endeared him to the lady. The Japanese courtier of the eleventh century, on the other hand, was adamant in his insistence on aesthetic accomplishments in any woman he might offer his love. A note from her in somewhat less than flawless calligraphy, or a disillusioning glimpse of her sleeve that suggested the lady lacked a perfect sensitivity to color harmonies, might easily have dampened his ardor.

The elevation of aestheticism to something close to a religion was achieved at the Japanese court in the tenth century. It naturally involved an insistence on elegance of manners and an attention to protocol that may remind us of Versailles. But at the Japanese court, unlike Versailles, it was not only the *petit marquis*, the fop, who composed verses to his lady, but everyone, from the Emperor down. Letters normally took the form of poems, exquisitely penned on paper of an exactly appropriate texture and in ink of the correct degree of blackness; folded with dexterity, and attached to a spray of seasonal flowers, they were entrusted to a page attired in a manner worthy of his master's dignity.

Aestheticism spread from the court to the provinces, and from the upper classes to the commoners. The cult of cherry blossoms, which apparently originated at the court in Kyoto, today is universal: radio announcements inform the breathless public at which sites the blossoms are eight-tenths opened and at which only seven-tenths, and eager busloads

of factory workers head for the suitable spots. Not all Japanese homes are aesthetically pleasing, of course, but whenever financially possible it is attempted to create at least in one corner something suggesting the simplicity and elegance of the traditional aesthetics.

Japanese aesthetics can be approached not only through the relatively scant writings of the old literature specifically devoted to the subject, but through the evidence in works of literature or criticism, in objects of art, and even in the manner of life of the Japanese as a whole, so pervasive has aestheticism been. A number of headings under which Japanese aesthetics might be discussed come to mind: suggestion, irregularity, simplicity, and perishability. These related concepts point to the most typical forms of Japanese aesthetic expression, though, as I have indicated, exaggeration, uniformity, profusion and durability are by no means absent.

SUGGESTION

The poet and critic Fujiwara no Kintō (966-1041), dividing poetry into nine categories of excellence, described the highest category thus: "The language is magical and conveys more meanings than the words themselves express." To illustrate this criterion he offered the following poem:

honobono to	Dimly, dimly
Akashi no ura no	The day breaks at Akashi Bay;
asagiri ni	And in the morning mist
shimagakureyuku	My heart follows a vanishing ship
fune wo shi zo omou	As it goes behind an island.

Part of the beauty of this poem lies in the use of language and even the sounds (for example, the *o* sounds of the first line echoed at the end), but its chief claim to distinction in the eyes of Fujiwara no Kintō was its power of suggesting unspoken implications. The poem would be less if more specific: if, for example, it made clear that the poet's sweetheart was aboard the disappearing ship or that the poet himself for some reason wished he were aboard. The ambiguity, a well-known feature of the Japanese language, which commonly omits the subjects of sentences, is exploited in this poem so as to expand the thirty-one syllables of the *tanka* to suggest an atmosphere and an emotional state nowhere specifically stated. A sense of mystery is intensified by the mist obscuring the dawn seascape as the ship disappears. What did this sight mean to the poet?

Clearly he did not remain impassive, a mere observer. But if the instant when the ship disappeared he felt a stab of parting, he does not choose to explain why.

The reliance of this poem on suggestion, if not a uniquely Japanese phenomenon, is certainly unlike the common European forms of literary expression. Ambiguity was not highly esteemed by, say, Renaissance writers on poetics, who associated it with the humor of the pun.¹ However rich in ambiguity the sonnets of Shakespeare may actually be, some statement of truth or experience is invariably made. But what is the statement in this Japanese poem? Surely it is not the simple recording of a casual event of an autumn morning; the sight unquestionably had meaning for the poet, and he assumes it will have meaning for the reader too, but he does not define its nature.

The element of suggestion in the poem is the source of its beauty, yet when compared to later Japanese poetry its level of suggestion may seem shallow. By the end of the twelfth century the ideal known as *yūgen* (or, mystery and depth) was developed by Fujiwara Shunzei (1114–1204). *Yūgen* as an aesthetic principle has been defined by Brower and Miner in *Japanese Court Poetry* as “The mid-classical ideal of tonal complexity conveyed by the overtones . . . of poems typically in the mode of descriptive symbolism.”² This ideal may recall Poe’s “suggestive indefiniteness of vague and therefore of spiritual effect.” The vagueness admired by Poe was easily achieved by Japanese poets, thanks to the Japanese language. The lack of distinctions between singular and plural or between definite and indefinite contributes to the ambiguity, at least to the Western reader who is accustomed to such distinctions. For a Japanese poet precision in language would limit the range of suggestion, as we can easily see from a famous *haiku* by Bashō (1644–94):

kareeda ni	On the withered bough
karasu no tomarikeri	A crow has alighted:
aki no kure	Nightfall in autumn.

This English translation represents a possible interpretation of the Japanese words, but the arbitrary nature of its choices of singular and plural is apparent from an eighteenth century painting illustrating this *haiku* that depicts no less than eight crows alighted on a number of withered branches. This equally possible interpretation of the poem presents a landscape less lonely than that of a single crow on a single withered branch, an interpretation of the poem found in other illustrative paintings, but may convey an even more brooding intensity. Again, the last line of the *haiku*,

aki no kure, can also be interpreted as meaning “the nightfall of autumn”—that is, the end of autumn. If we were to insist on determining which meaning the poet intended, whether the nightfall of a particular autumn day or the end of the autumnal season, the answer might well be that *both* were intended. If Bashō’s phrase were interpreted as meaning nightfall, regardless of whether it were early or late in autumn, it might suggest that the crow (or crows) was alighting on a withered branch in a tree otherwise filled with bright leaves, producing a disharmonious impression; but if the scene intended had been an unspecified time of day towards the end of autumn, it might mean that the crow was alighting in the full glare of noon, an equally inappropriate possibility. Many meanings and implications may be extracted from the seventeen syllables of this *haiku*, thanks to the ambiguity of the language, but Bashō’s ultimate meaning may still elude us: what he intended the two elements of the *haiku* to say about each other, and how far beyond the words themselves the suggestions reach.

The *haiku* on the alighting crow exemplifies a related aspect of Japanese aesthetics, the preference for monochromes to bright colors. It is true that magnificent examples of Japanese art—the celebrated *Tale of Genji* scroll among them—are brilliantly colored, but I believe that most Japanese critics would agree that the prevailing preference in Japanese aesthetics has been for the monochrome. The black crow alighting on a withered branch at a time of day and season when all color has vanished suggests the lonely beauty admired by countless Japanese poets, or the severity of Japanese gardens consisting of stones and sand, or the unpainted interiors and exteriors of a Japanese house. The use of color can be brilliant, but it inevitably limits the suggestive range: when a flower is painted red, it can be no other color, but the black outline of a flower on white paper will let us imagine whatever color we choose.

These words may suggest the aesthetics of Zen Buddhism. Indeed, much of what is considered most typical in Japanese aesthetics stems from Zen. Or, it might be more accurate to say, it coincides with Zen. The simplicity of a Shinto shrine building, the bare lines of its architecture and grounds, was an expression of an indigenous preference which coincided with Zen ideals, and made the Japanese receptive to the more sophisticated aesthetics of the continental religion. The Japanese were equally receptive to the aesthetics of the Chinese artists and poets of the Sung Dynasty who also favored monochromes. But the principle of suggestion as an aesthetic technique need not have been learned from abroad.

Suggestion as an artistic technique is given one of its most perfect

forms of expression in the Nō theatre. The undecorated stage, the absence of props other than bare outlines, the disregard for all considerations of time and space in the drama, the use of a language that is usually obscure and of abstract gestures that are scarcely related to the words, all make it evident that this theatre, unlike representational examples elsewhere (or Kabuki in Japan), was meant to be the outward, beautiful form suggestive of remoter truths or experiences, the nature of which will differ from person to person. The large role played by suggestion, as contrasted with the explicit descriptions of people and situations we more normally encounter in the theatre, gives the Nō an absolute character. It baffles or bores many Japanese, but it moves others in ways that more conventional, dated varieties of drama cannot, and the same holds true of Western spectators. The groans, the harsh music that precedes the entrance of the actors, may irritate a contemporary spectator, but they may also make him sense in a way impossible with words alone the distance separating the world of the dead from the world of the living, the terrible attachment to this world that causes ghosts to return again to suffer the past, or the pain of being born.

Nō can profoundly move even Western spectators totally unfamiliar with Japanese culture, but it can equally repel others who are committed to a representational variety of theatre. Performances staged in Europe and America have been criticized as having insignificant plots and inadequate characterization. After a performance in New York a member of the Actors' Studio complained that the character Tsunemasa did nothing to convince the audience he was indeed a great musician. Such objections, which would be scornfully rejected by admirers of Nō, cannot be attributed merely to the hostility of people ignorant of tradition. Suggestion as an aesthetic method is always open to the charge of deception—of being no more than the Emperor's new clothes. The monk Shōtetsu, writing in the fifteenth century, recognized that the mysterious powers of suggestion designated by the term *yūgen* could not be appreciated by most men:

"*Yūgen* can be apprehended by the mind, but it cannot be expressed in words. Its quality may be suggested by the sight of a thin cloud veiling the moon or by autumn mist swathing the scarlet leaves on a mountain-side. If one is asked where in these sights lies the *yūgen*, 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. It is quite impossible to explain wherein lies the interest or the remarkable nature of *yūgen*."³

Perhaps this is what Fujiwara no Teika (1162-1241) had in mind when he wrote this famous poem:

miwataseba hana mo momiji mo nakarikeri ura no tomaya no aki no yūgure	In this wide landscape I see no cherry blossoms And no crimson leaves— Evening in autumn over A straw-thatched hut by the bay.
--	--

Teika looks out on a landscape that lacks the conventionally admired sights of Japanese poetry, but he discovers that it is precisely the austerity of the monochrome landscape that stirs in him an awareness of a deeper beauty. If someone were to deny the existence of this beauty and say that all the poet saw was a wretched fisherman's hut and the rest was an illusion, Teika could not defend himself. Suggestion depends on a willingness to admit that meanings exist beyond what can be seen or described. In the theatre the Nō actors risk failure if the audience refuses to make this concession, but for the Japanese poet or connoisseur of art the pleasures of suggestion could become an end in themselves, to the exclusion of considerations of convincing representation. We can infer this from a famous passage found in *Essays in Idleness* by Kenkō (1283-1350):

Are we to look at cherry blossoms only in full bloom, the moon only when it is cloudless? To long for the moon while looking on the rain, to lower the blinds and be unaware of the passing of the spring—these are even more deeply moving. Branches about to blossom or gardens strewn with faded flowers are worthier of our admiration.⁴

A more common Western conception is that of the climax, the terrible moment when Laocoön and his sons are caught in the serpent's embrace, or the ecstatic moment when the soprano hits high C; but for Kenkō the climax was less interesting than the beginnings and ends, for it left nothing to be imagined. The full moon or the cherry blossoms at their peak do not suggest the crescent or the buds, though the crescent and buds (or the waning moon and the strewn flowers) do suggest the full moon and full flowering. Perfection, like some inviolable sphere, repels the imagination, allowing it no room to penetrate. Bashō's only poem about Mount Fuji describes a day when fog prevented him from seeing the peak. Beginnings that suggest what is to come, or ends that suggest what has been, allow the imagination room to expand beyond the literal facts to the limits of the capacities of the reader of a poem, the spectator at a Nō play, or the connoisseur of a monochrome painting. Beginnings and ends

are also of special interest with respect to the development of the form itself: primitive painting or the moderns are more apt to excite people today than the works of Raphael or of Andrea del Sarto, the perfect painter. Here, as so often, a curious coincidence brings traditional Japanese tastes into congruence with those of the contemporary West.

IRREGULARITY

The emphasis on beginnings and ends implied a rejection of regularity as well as of perfection. We know from the earliest literary and artistic remains that the Japanese have generally avoided symmetry and regularity, perhaps finding them constricting and obstructive to the powers of suggestion. Symmetry in Japanese literature and art, whether in the use of parallel prose or architectural constructions arranged along a central axis, almost invariably reflect Chinese or other continental influence. In the *Fudoki*, gazetteers compiled by imperial order early in the eighth century, we find such passages as: "In spring the cherry trees along the shore are a thousand shades of color; in autumn the leaves on the banks are tinted a hundred hues. The warbler's song is heard in the fields, and cranes are seen dancing on the strand. Village boys and fisher girls throng the shore; merchants and farmers pole their boats to and fro." The relentless insistence on parallel expression, so natural to the Chinese, was normally antithetical to the Japanese, despite occasional experimentations. This passage represented an ill-digested emulation of Chinese writing that contrasts with the almost invariable preference for irregularity, and even for prime numbers: for example, the thirty-one syllables of the *tanka*, the classic verse form, are arranged in lines of 5, 7, 5, 7 and 7 syllables. Nothing could be farther removed from the couplets and quatrains that make up normal poetic usage in so many countries. Even when the Japanese intended to take over bodily a Chinese artistic conception, such as the architectural plan of a monastery, they seem to have felt uncomfortable with the stark symmetry prescribed, and before long broke the monotony by moving some buildings to the other side of the central axis. Soper contrasted the regularity of Chinese temple architecture with its subsequent development in Japan: "What remained from the first generation was a sensible irregularity of plan. . . . At the Shingon Kongōbuji on Kōyasan, the central cleared area is a fairly spacious and level one that might have permitted at least a minimal Chinese scheme. Instead, as if by deliberate rejection, the main elements, though they face south, are on independent axes."⁵

Kenkō suggested why the Japanese were so fond of irregularity: "In everything, no matter what it may be, uniformity is undesirable. Leaving something incomplete makes it interesting, and gives one the feeling that there is room for growth." Or again, "People often say that a set of books looks ugly if all volumes are not in the same format, but I was impressed to hear the Abbot Kōyū say, 'It is typical of the unintelligent man to insist on assembling complete sets of everything. Imperfect sets are better.'⁶ Undoubtedly librarians in Kenkō's day were less enthusiastic than he about the desirability of incomplete sets, but as anyone knows who has ever confronted the grim volumes of a complete set of the Harvard Classics, they do not invite browsing.

A partiality for irregularity reveals itself also in the ceramics preferred by the Japanese. If you are a guest at a tea ceremony and are offered your choice of bowl—a lovely celadon piece, or a fine porcelain with delicate patterns, or a bumpy, misshapen pot rather suggesting an old shoe—it is easy to prove your appreciation of Japanese aesthetics by unhesitatingly selecting the old shoe. A perfectly formed round bowl is boring to the Japanese, for it lacks any trace of the individuality of the potter.

In calligraphy too, copybook perfection is ridiculed or condescendingly dismissed as something best left to the Chinese; Japanese preference tends to favor the lop-sided, exaggeratedly individual characters written by a *haiku* or tea ceremony master. In gardens too, the geometrically executed formations of the Alhambra or Versailles would seem to the Japanese less a place to repose the eyes and heart than a rigid mathematical demonstration. The Chinese garden, more natural than the European formal garden, inspired the romanticism of design so dear to the eighteenth-century English landscape architects. But the Japanese went far beyond the Chinese in the irregularity and even eccentricity of their gardens. Derek Clifford in *A History of Garden Design* expressed his disapproval of Japanese gardens, contrasting them with the more agreeable Chinese; according to Clifford, "the Chinese stopped short at the extreme lengths of development to which the Japanese went."⁷ Clifford seems never to have actually seen a Japanese garden, but he found the famous stone and sand garden of the Ryōanji, the subject of an admiring essay by Sacheverell Sitwell, to be offensive and even dangerous: "It is the logical conclusion of the refinement of the senses, the precipitous world of the abstract painter, a world in which the stains on the cover of a book can absorb one more utterly than the ceiling of the Sistine chapel; it is the narrow knife edge of art, overthrowing and discarding all that man has ever been and achieved in favour of some mystic contemplative ecstasy, a sort of

suspended explosion of the mind, the dissolution of identity. You really cannot go much further than this unless you sit on a cushion like Oscar Wilde and contemplate the symmetry of an orange."⁸

The symmetry of an orange was hardly calculated to absorb the attention of the architects of this exceedingly asymmetrical garden. The marvellous irregularity of the disposition of the stones eludes the analysis of the most sensitive observer. Far from being the artless "stains on the cover of a book," the Ryōanji garden is the product of a philosophical system—that of Zen Buddhism—as serious as that which inspired the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. And, it might be argued, even a European might derive greater pleasure from daily contemplation of the fifteen stones of the Ryōanji garden than of the Sistine Chapel, without "overthrowing and discarding all that man has ever been and achieved." The Sistine Chapel is magnificent, but it asks our admiration rather than our participation; the stones of the Ryōanji, irregular in shape and position, by allowing us to participate in the creation of the garden may move us even more. But that may be, again, because our own age is closer in artistic expression to that of the Ryōanji than to that of Michelangelo.

SIMPLICITY

The use of the most economical means to obtain the desired effect, the product of Zen philosophy, is another characteristic of the garden of the Ryōanji. The same philosophy affected the creation of many other gardens—the waterless river that swirls through the landscape of the Tenryūji garden, foaming over artfully placed rocks, or the waterless cascade that tumbles through green moss at the Saihōji. But the preference for simplicity in gardens is not restricted to those of Zen temples. The use of a single natural rock for the bridge over a tiny pond or for a water basin suggests the love of the texture of the stone untampered with by human skill. Even the disdain for flowers as a distracting and disruptive element in a garden suggests an insistence on the bare bones of the abstract garden, which has no need for the superficial charm of an herbaceous border or a flower bed that is "a riot of color." Simplicity and the natural qualities of the materials employed may have been first emphasized by the Zen teachers, but they are now common ideals of the Japanese people. Soper has pointed out: "A feature of Zen buildings which their origin makes curious is their frequently complete lack of painted decoration, interiors and exteriors alike being left in natural wood. Such austerity

is certainly non-Chinese, and must mark a deliberate choice on the part of early Japanese Zen masters . . . in compliance with the spirit of simplicity inherent in Zen teachings."⁹ Early Buddhist temples in Japan had been painted on the outside, generally a dull red (as we may see today at the Byōdōin), but from the thirteenth century onwards most temples, regardless of their sect, tended to be built of unpainted wood. The same held true of palaces and private houses.

Kenkō's expression of his own preference for simplicity in the decoration of a house came to be shared by most Japanese: "A house which multitudes of workmen have polished with every care, where strange and rare Chinese and Japanese furnishings are displayed, and even the grasses and trees of the garden have been trained unnaturally, is ugly to look at and most depressing."¹⁰ It is easier for us to assent to this opinion than it would have been for Western writers fifty years ago. Few writers on Japanese aesthetics today would describe the Ginkakuji (Silver Pavilion) in Sanson's words as "an insignificant structure which belies its name . . . simple to the verge of insipidity."¹¹ The Ginkakuji does not strike me as an insignificant structure; I certainly prefer it to the elaborate mausolea of the Tokugawa at Nikkō, and I believe most other students of Japan would share my views. But traditionally in the West the house which "multitudes of workmen have polished with every care" has been considered the most desirable, as we know from old photographs showing the profusion of treasures with which the drawing rooms of the rich were commonly adorned. Gardens where even the trees and grasses have been trained unnaturally still attract visitors to the great houses of Europe.

Probably the most extreme expression of the Japanese love for unobtrusive elegance is the tea ceremony. The ideal sought by the great teamaster Sen no Rikyū (1521-91) was *sabi*, a word related to *sabi* "rust" or *sabireru* "to become desolate." This may seem to be a curious aesthetic ideal, but it arose as a reaction to the parvenu extravagance of Rikyū's master, the dictator Hideyoshi, who had built a solid gold portable teahouse he doted on so much he took it with him everywhere on his travels. Rikyū's *sabi* was not the enforced simplicity of the man who could not afford better, but a refusal of easily obtainable luxury, a preference for a rusty-looking kettle to one of gold or gleaming newness, a preference for a tiny undecorated hut to the splendors of a palace. This was not the same as Marie Antoinette playing at shepherdess; in fact, it represented a return to the normal Japanese fondness for simplicity and was in no sense an affectation. *Sabi* was accepted because it accorded with deep-seated aesthetic beliefs. The tea ceremony today is sometimes attacked as being a

perversion of the ideals it once embodied, but the expense of a great deal of money to achieve a look of bare simplicity is entirely in keeping with Japanese tradition.

The tea ceremony developed as an art concealing art, an extravagance masked in the garb of noble poverty. The Portuguese missionary João Rodrigues (1561-1634) left behind an appreciative description of a tea ceremony he had attended, but he could not restrain his astonishment over the lengths to which the Japanese carried their passion for unobtrusive luxury: "Because they greatly value and enjoy this kind of gathering to drink tea, they spend large sums of money in building such a house, rough though it may be, and in purchasing the things needed for drinking the kind of tea which is offered in these meetings. Thus there are utensils, albeit of earthenware, which come to be worth ten, twenty or thirty thousand *crúzados* or even more—a thing which will appear as madness and barbarity to other nations that know of it."¹²

Madness perhaps, but surely not barbarity! Everything about the tea ceremony was controlled by the most highly developed aesthetic sensibilities. The avoidance of conspicuous wealth was reinforced by an avoidance of color in the hut, of perfume in the flowers displayed, and of taste in the food offered. The interior of the hut, though it embraces many textures of wood and matting, tends to be almost exclusively in shades of brown, with perhaps a pale dot of color in the alcove. There may be incense burnt, generally of an astringent nature, but the typical scents of Western flowers—rose, carnation or lilac—would be unthinkable. This preference for understatement may stem from the "climate" of Japan. A Japanese teacher once suggested to me that the colors preferred in Japanese art owed their muted hues to the natural colors of seashells. Whether this is strictly true or not, it is certainly easy to distinguish Japanese prints before and after the introduction of Western dyes. But after a brief period of fascination with the screaming purples, crimsons and emeralds of the new, exotic colors, the Japanese returned to the seashells. It is true that the Japanese landscape offers few bright floral colors, and the native flowers have virtually no smell. The aesthetic choices made in the tea hut may owe as much to nature as to deliberate policy.

Japanese food too, and not only that served in the tea ceremony, lacks the intensity of taste found elsewhere. Just as the faint perfume of the plum blossoms is preferred to the heavy odor of the lily, the barely perceptible differences in flavor between different varieties of raw fish are prized extravagantly. The Zen monastery vegetarian cuisine, though the subject of much self-adulation, offers a meagre range of tastes, and the fineness

of a man's palate can be tested by his ability to distinguish virtually tasteless dishes of the same species. The virtuosity is impressive, but it would be hard to convince a Chinese or a European that a lump of cold bean curd dotted with a dash of soy sauce is indeed superior to the supposedly cloying flavors of *haute cuisine*. The early European visitors to Japan, though they praised almost everything else, had nothing good to say about Japanese food. Bernardo de Avila Girón wrote, "I will not praise Japanese food for it is not good, albeit it is pleasing to the eye, but instead I will describe the clean and peculiar way in which it is served."¹³ The absence of meat, in conformance with the Buddhist proscription, undoubtedly limited the appeal of Japanese cuisine to the Portuguese and Spanish visitors, but the characteristic preference for simplicity and naturalness—the undisguised flavors of vegetables and fish—was essentially aesthetic.

The insistence on simplicity and naturalness placed a premium on the connoisseur's appreciation of quality. An unpainted wooden column shows the natural quality of the tree from which it was formed just as an uncooked piece of fish reveals its freshness more than one surrounded by sauce. In the Nō theatre too the lack of the usual distractions in a performance—sets, lighting and the rest—focuses all attention on the actor, and demands a connoisseur to appreciate the slight differences in gesture or voice that distinguish a great actor from a merely competent one. Within the limited ranges permitted in their traditional arts the Japanese prized shadings. Seldom did the painter, poet or Nō actor take the risks involved in bold statement, as opposed to controlled simplicity; for this reason there is almost nothing of bad taste in traditional Japan. Simplicity is safer than profusion as an aesthetic guide, but if the outsider fails to develop the virtuoso sensibilities of the Japanese he may find that he craves something beyond understatement—whether the brilliance of a chandelier, the depth of taste of a great wine, or the overpowering sound of the Miserere in *Il Trovatore*. The Japanese by choosing suggestion and simplicity forfeited a part of the possible artistic effects, but when they succeeded they created works of art of a beauty unaffected by the shifting tides of taste.

PERISHABILITY

Beyond the preference for simplicity and the natural qualities of things lies what is perhaps the most distinctively Japanese aesthetic ideal, perishability. The desire in the West has generally been to achieve artistic immor-

tality, and this has led men to erect monuments in deathless marble. The realization that even such monuments crumble and disappear has brought tears to the eyes of the poets. The Japanese have built for impermanence, though paradoxically some of the oldest buildings in the world exist in Japan. The Japanese belief that perishability is a necessary element in beauty does not of course mean that they have been insensitive to the poignance of the passage of time. Far from it. Whatever the subject matter of the old poems, the underlying meaning was often an expression of grief over the fragility of beauty and love. Yet the Japanese were keenly aware that without this mortality there could be no beauty. Kenkō wrote, "If man were never to fade away like the dews of Adashino, never to vanish like the smoke over Toribeyama, but lingered on forever in the world, how things would lose their power to move us! The most precious thing in life is its uncertainty."¹⁴ The frailty of human existence, a common theme in literature throughout the world, has rarely been recognized as the necessary condition of beauty. The Japanese not only knew this, but expressed their preference for varieties of beauty which most conspicuously betrayed their impermanence. Their favorite flower is of course the cherry blossom, precisely because the period of blossoming is so poignantly brief and the danger that the flowers may scatter even before one has properly seen them is so terribly great. Yet for the day or two of pleasure of the blossoming the Japanese dote on a fruit tree that bears no fruit, but instead attracts a disagreeable quantity of insects. Plum blossoms look much the same and are graced with a scent so faint that even a teamster could not object, but they are less highly prized because they linger so long on the boughs. The samurai was traditionally compared to the cherry blossoms, and his ideal was to drop dramatically, at the height of his strength and beauty, rather than to become an old soldier gradually fading away.

The visible presence of perishability in the cracked tea bowl carefully mended in gold has been appreciated not because it makes the object an indisputable antique, but because without the possibility of aging with time and usage there could be no real beauty. Kenkō quoted with approval the poet Ton'a who said, "It is only after the silk wrapper has frayed at top and bottom, and the mother-of-pearl has fallen from the roller, that a scroll looks beautiful."¹⁵ This delight in shabbiness may suggest the Arabic conception of *barak*, the magical quality an object acquires through long use and care. It is obviously at variance not only with the common Western craving for objects in mint condition, but with the desire to annihilate time by restoring a painting so perfectly that people will

exclaim, "It could have been painted yesterday!" An object of gleaming stainless steel that never aged would surely have been repugnant to the Japanese of the past whose love of old things implied the accretions of time.

The traditional Japanese aesthetics cannot be summed up in a few pages, but even without verbalizing what they were it is easy to sense them at work in the objects created and in the objects for which we will look in vain. The virtuoso connoisseur seems now to have shifted his talents to distinguishing between brands of beer or tobacco, and the perfectionist workman may be replaced by a machine, but it seems safe to say that the aesthetic ideals which have formed Japanese taste over the centuries will find their outlet in media yet undiscovered and maintain their distinctive existence.

NOTES

1. See for example the views of Giangiorgio Trissino in Allan H. Gilbert, *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden*, pp. 228-31.
2. Robert H. Brower and Earl Miner, *Japanese Court Poetry*, p. 514.
3. Quoted in Tsunoda, de Bary and Keene, *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, p. 285.
4. Kenkō, *Essays in Idleness*, translated by Keene, p. 115.
5. Paine and Soper, *The Art and Architecture of Japan*, pp. 210-11.
6. Kenkō, p. 70.
7. Clifford, p. 116.
8. Clifford, p. 122.
9. Alexander C. Soper, *The Evolution of Architecture in Japan*, p. 246.
10. Kenkō, p. 10.
11. G. B. Sansom, *Japan, a Short Cultural History*, p. 401.
12. Quoted in Michael Cooper, *They Came to Japan*, p. 265.
13. Cooper, p. 194.
14. Kenkō, p. 7. Adashino was a graveyard, and Toribeyama the site of a crematorium.
15. Kenkō, p. 70.