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A Style of the Literati: Reconsidering the Aesthetics of *Wabi* and *Sabi* in World Culture

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In his impressions on the exhibition of two contemporary Japanese artists in Paris, the writer Genyū Sōkyū mentions the absence of Plato's "idea," the "search of something immutable and eternal," in Eastern thought. Such a quest for "the transience and void of something that came before this concept of 'idea'" in Japan he relates to "what the Greeks called *physis* or simply Nature," yet a Nature which "is not wilderness." Linking this notion of transience through the Buddhist concepts of *mujō* and *engi* with the aesthetic concepts of *mono no aware*, *wabi-sabi*, and *fūryū* all together, Genyū points to the "uniqueness of Japanese expression" and thus determines the exhibition in question as an expression of "Japanese-ness."¹

Yet, does contemporary Japanese abstract art sprout directly from the roots of *mono no aware*, *wabi-sabi*, and *fūryū*? When discussing this question with one of the Japanese artists in the above mentioned exhibition, Makoto Ofune, he admitted being influenced rather by Western trends than by Japanese tradition and I think this influence is relevant both to artists looking for the depths of transience and to those like Okamoto Tarō searching for "Japanese-ness" in pre-*wabi* times. Thus I came to a reconsideration of the place *wabi* and *sabi* occupy in Japanese aesthetics as well as the way this aesthetic influences the Japanese sense of beauty. This reconsideration became the object of research during my stay at Nichibunken in 2014. My aim was to look at the Japanese apprehension of beauty from the perspective of the whole, in its dynamism and chain-like transformation.

It is true that the Japanese, since the introduction of Buddhist thought, have always been very sensitive to the impermanence and transience of things, and although philosophically there might be some debates, saying that Buddhist philosophy contrasts with that of Christianity in this respect should not be a huge mistake. Yet, as far as contemporary Japanese art is concerned, the question is whether the idea of transience is inherited through direct transmission of Japanese tradition or is a returning influence from abroad.

1 Genyū Sōkyū, contribution in *I Puissance*, pamphlet of the exhibition of Tomoko Ishida and Makoto Ofune, 2009.

As Alexandra Munroe points in the Introduction to *The Third Mind*, “the use of Asian art and thought to inspire new forms of artistic expression is one of the greatest forces in modern and contemporary art in America.”² It seems that “from the 1840s, when Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau’s readings of the Bhagavad Gita, the Lotus Sutra, Tao Te Ching, and the Upanishads influenced their quests for a wholeness of self in relation to cosmic nature, artists deliberately abstained from European empiricism and utilitarianism and looked toward Asia to forge an independent artistic identity that would define the modern age—and the modern mind—in a new transcendentalist understanding of existence and consciousness.”³ And within the stream of Buddhist philosophy flowing into the West at that time, the influence of Japanese Zen was undeniably increasing. Zen conquered the West not only with its philosophy, but also with its aesthetics, the main feature of which was related to the aesthetics of *wabi* and *sabi*. It did not gain immediate acceptance, though.

Edward Morse wrote, “Among the kinds [of pottery] most prized by the Japanese are those which come with the general name of Karatsu. Here certainly could be no greater contrast than that shown between the exquisite white porcelain and the rough, dark, and archaic looking bowls and jars of Karatsu. Of a later date may be considered the work of Goroshichi and the products of Kameyama, Bōgasaki, Utsutsugawa, and others, among which are found many pieces of interest.”⁴

Judging by the description of the Morse collection and other Western sources, *wabi* style pottery was purchased at the time as something valuable in Japan, yet not as something exactly liked and admired. Morse also mentioned the demerits of the “archaic appearance” of the Karatsu pottery, as well as its “hard, rough clay, which presents in many pieces a resemblance to cast iron.” If one admits that “there is a certain charm about it,” the person should study in order to feel that charm.

During that time, what gained the admiration of Western appreciators were the striking ukiyo-e prints, the unusual forms of kimono patterns, and the high quality of Japanese porcelain, all of these interpreted according to the principles of taste in the West, and inspiring the French Art Déco style. The *wabi* style needed some more time and knowledge of Buddhist ideas so that its charm could be appreciated.

2 Alexandra Munroe, “Introduction” in *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989*, on occasion of the exhibition of the same name, Guggenheim Museum, 2009, p. 21.

3 Ibid.

4 Edward S. Morse, *Catalogue of Japanese Pottery*, Cambridge: Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 1900.

Yet there came a time when people in the West were suddenly strongly attracted by *wabi* aesthetics. This was right after World War II. There is little wonder in this, as the War created in Europe and in North America the same spiritual turmoil as the one created in Japan by the long and severe internal-war period at the time when *wabi* philosophy fused with the Chinese Chan to give birth to Zen aesthetics. It happened that this aesthetics spread in the West exactly through Zen and that is why it is still often mistaken for and thoroughly associated with it.

The expanding democratization in Japan itself after the War opened the possibility to reach up to what was till then a quite restricted high-class culture and in this respect *wabi-sabi* aesthetics—with its restriction to an elite with the means to afford it, the intelligence to understand it, and the spiritual predisposition to accept it—became the new ideal for spiritual quality.

Yet we can hardly say that the aesthetic preferences of the Japanese masses after the War were for *wabi* ideals. Its popularization was rather limited to young women of well-off families, who would study tea ceremony with the aim to become refined ladies hoping for a good marriage. Thus, *wabi-sabi* aesthetics probably entered more and more Japanese homes through the tea-ceremony education of their daughters, yet preserved a very special form of elitism. On the one hand, it was evident on the trivial, materialistic level, insofar as not all who took lessons could afford to purchase more than the minimum of the variety of hugely expensive tea bowls and other utensils entailed. On the other hand, it was elitist also on a spiritual level, as the basic movements could be memorized with lessons, but enjoyment of the depth of *wabi* and *sabi* through the tea ceremony depended on much wider education and involvement. So the more young ladies studied tea ceremony, the more most of them found it difficult to understand and enjoy, and eventually abandoned any interest in it. As tea ceremony was the representative of the *wabi-sabi* style which reached the most popular level, we can imagine thus how less spread were other employments of this style, like Noh plays, ink wash paintings *suibokuga*, the dedication to a simple life-style devoted to poetry and art, and so on. In reality, the core of *wabi* and *sabi* was wrapped even more than in the past in the mystery of the unapproachable for the uninitiated, of something spiritually too high and too deep in terms of sensitivity.

It can be said, actually, that the elitism of the tea ceremony was an asset which corresponded to a display of opulence. It is usual for wealthy people all over the world

to show off in a flashy way, the targets being obviously attractive items, like precious metals and stones, or objects of art that are not only expensive, but also easy to appreciate from first glance. This creates an elitism based on materialistic value. With the aesthetics of *wabi* and *sabi* the value shifts to the level of intelligence and even higher—to that of refinement. Proclaiming a contempt for obvious beauty and decoration (often described as an aim at shabbiness and even poverty), this style valued materials less flashy yet no less expensive; its rough and simple design cost often more than a rich decoration with precious stones. The value in this case was often restricted only to the eye of the connoisseur. The display of materialistic power was present again, yet the elite circle was thus further limited, excluding not only those who cannot afford it, but also those who cannot understand. In other words, the few “chosen” felt still more exceptional as they were perceived as not just people of means but also of knowledge. This manner of showing off not to just everyone but to a special circle thus doubled the criteria for appreciation and with it, the pleasure of the display.

Such a kind of refined elitism lay at the base of modern art and it seems to me to be a side of the influence of *wabi* and *sabi* in the Western world after the War. The difference with the situation from before pre-War Japan was that the elite who appreciated *wabi-sabi* aesthetics changed. Although it was never linked with cheap prices or popular culture, the materialistic aspect was overcome by an abstract one, the elite of knowledge gained over the elite of wealth, and connoisseurs emerged from all levels of society. Yet it did not become a leading feature of Japanese art right away, as it is, we might say, today.

Ever since the Meiji period and especially after the War, many Japanese artists were very much concerned with proving themselves to the world in Western terms. To do so they were either exploiting the techniques and avant-garde ideas spread in the West, or, according to these ideas, they were looking deep into the pre- and early historic traditions of their people, like the painter Okamoto Tarō. Also, the *wabi-Zen* legacy was for them what *miyabi* beauty had been for the warrior class—the essential values of the previous, no longer acceptable, government.

Thus, the appreciation of *wabi* and *sabi* aesthetics in Japanese art had to reenter Japan during the 1970s from the West, where leading intellectual and artistic circles had by then begun to embrace some of its principles. That is when, after such a round-world voyage, *wabi* and *sabi* found new ground in the art of design and gave birth to the famous contemporary “Japanese style.” Through it, this beauty was newly perceived in the West,

this time on a much larger scale than before. Thus the time came when architects like Andō Tadao would make amateurs of art travel half the globe with the main purpose to visit the spaces they had created, and others, such as Sejima Kazuyo and Nishizawa Ryūe, would build admired structures not only in their home country but also in Europe and America.