

Aesthetic of Imperfection: Discovering the Value of Discontinuity and Fragmentation

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Abstract

Through my contribution, I would like to raise the question, how the “aesthetic of imperfection” was admitted into the realm of Western collections of Oriental Art? While the great European collections of Oriental art were focussing on Chinese ceramics by paying tribute to the values of perfection and symmetry, during the last decade of the nineteenth and even more at the beginning of the twentieth century, a very different aesthetic value made its way into the mindset of connoisseurs and art collectors. By a detailed survey, this paper will trace the arrival of Japanese pottery and ceramics in European collections. The values of discontinuity, fragmentation and imperfection, deeply anchored in tea ceremony, were expressed in Okakura Tenshin’s writings (The Book of Tea, 1906). This most seminal book had been translated into German in 1919 and into French in 1927. It contributed to a change of vision, a shift of paradigms. In my paper, I will investigate into the conditions of a new and surprising appreciation of Japanese taste, which can only be understood through the preparation of a specifically European desire for imperfection. This desire, as I will show, relies on a sensitive substrate, elaborated and introduced by new visual experiments of avant-garde groups. By adopting the values of discontinuity and fragmentation, the artists of the avant-garde develop, in their own visual language, a new type of ceramics, Arts & Crafts, design and architecture, governed by the idea of indetermination and je-ne-sais-quoi. During the early Modernist time, East and West able to agree upon a common, yet different reference to value of imperfection that helped them to identify themselves through mutual projections.

Discontinuity and Fragmentation

If the great European collections of Oriental art were focussing on Chinese ceramics (valuing perfection and symmetry), in the last decade of the nineteenth and even more at the beginning of the twentieth century, a very different aesthetic value made its way into the mindset of *connoisseurs* and art collectors. Furthermore, I would like to show, how the “aesthetic of imperfection” was admitted into the realm of Western collections of Oriental Art.

In the realm of Oriental ceramics, we can notice a shift of taste at the very end of the nineteenth century, leading to a different perception of Japanese aesthetics. During the last decade of the nineteenth century,

the first ceramics related to the Tea Ceremony (*chanoyu*) were imported into Europe. Already in 1883, the book of Louis Gonse on Japanese Art, *L'art japonais*,¹ offered an introduction to Japanese ceramics. On Louis Gonse's request, the chapter on ceramics was written by the great art dealer and collector Siegfried Bing. In France, the place and role of art collectors and *connaissors* during the nineteenth century, such as Louis Gonse (1846–1921), Emile Guimet (1836–1918), Henri Cernuschi (1821–1896) or Edmond de Goncourt (1822–1896) as well as art dealers such as Siegfried Bing (1838–1905) and Hayashi Tadamasu 林忠正 (1853–1906) should not be underestimated². Art dealers provided the European market with ceramics, block-prints or other artwork. Bing and Hayashi acted as “ferryman” between East and West: they decisively contributed to the transfer of both objects and knowledge. In this same period, European artists discover a fictional ‘Japan’ as a radical ‘otherness’ corresponding to the request of an imaginary world. This exchange between East and West gave birth to a new European fashion, which has been extensively studied under the label of “Japonism.”³ The imported far Eastern culture is adopted by European artists who consider Japan as a kind of *cliché* offering a surface of projection for exotic *otherness*.

How was it possible that an elitist knowledge, primarily accessible only to small groups, was disseminated within Western societies? I would like to emphasize on the “reception” and the question: how was a negative assessment—the rustic appearance, and even ‘vulgar’ character of ceramics—transformed into a positive value of imperfection and fragmentation, which constitutes a major feature of the aesthetics of tea?

At the end of the nineteenth century, the great exhibitions contributed to spreading to a wider public the awareness and taste for a so-called ‘Japanese style’, which arose first among the small circle of avant-garde artists. In Paris, the collections of Siegfried Bing and Philippe Burty (1830–1890) were displayed at the *Exposition universelle* of 1878⁴. Then later on, the 1900 Exposition, held in Paris, was marked by a strong Japanese presence. Both events were decisive for the new appraisal of Japanese aesthetics.

Emile Guimet, after whom is named the famous Parisian Museum, visited the Philadelphia exhibition in 1876,⁵ before travelling through Japan, China and India between 1876 and 1877. Since Guimet had a strong interest in the history of Asian religions, he met, during his journey, a large number of Buddhist and Shintō priests. Guimet was accompanied by the French painter Félix Régamey (1844–1907). When the Guimet Museum in Paris was inaugurated in 1889, a tea ceremony was celebrated by the Japanese Ambassador

1 GONSE, Louis, *L'art japonais*, Paris: A. Quantin, 1883.

2 See, IMAI Yûko, “Changes in French Tastes for Japanese Ceramics”, *Japan Review*, 2004, 16, pp. 101–127. Imai Yûko identified 26 main French Collectors, specific to the reversal of taste of this period.

3 The reciprocal influence on Western mind to Japanese aesthetics arose (See INAGA & MIURA as well as research conducted by The Japonism Society).

4 INAGA Shigemi, “Arts et métiers traditionnels au Japon face à la Modernité occidentale (1850–1900): À l'écoute d'Henri Focillon” (Maison franco-japonaise à Tokyo, nov. 2008). Moreover, as it is shown by Inaga Shigemi, the Trocadero exhibition in 1878 displayed Tea instruments: “Un changement drastique commence à s'opérer aux alentours de l'Exposition universelle à Paris de 1878.”

5 Some of the Japanese objects related with the Tea ceremony displayed in the 1876 Philadelphia exhibition are now in the collections of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London.

in honor of Leon Gambetta (1838–1882) and Emile Guimet⁶.

Cernuschi's collection is based on a real critical knowledge of historical developments in ceramic technology. While Cernuschi was in possession of a huge collection of Japanese ceramics, very few items were actually displayed to the public. Thus, these Japanese collections remained partly 'invisible' for a few decades.⁷ The reason for this might be found in the prevailing preference for Chinese ceramics. During all the nineteenth century, in order to correspond to Western taste, Japanese potters even specially produced porcelains in Chinese style which were mainly destined for exportation.

Mutual Projections

Through this *vogue of porcelain*, it is interesting and amusing to notice that a German chemist, Gottfried Wagner (1831–1892) played an important role in the transfer of technology into Japan especially in relation to the use of (chemical) cobalt blue⁸. While Japanese artists observe the European evolution in order to renew their own production, Western artists start to look at Japanese art in a new way, allowing them to overcome the constraints of academism. As a matter of fact, Japanese potters did not only produce objects for export, they also created pieces, as, for example, imitations of Delft earthenware, by using the most contemporary modernist language.

Tea instruments, which played a central place in the process of understanding of this aesthetics of imperfection, were first displayed during the Great Exhibitions and become part of national collections. Tea instruments appeared in the great collection of Henri Cernuschi. They are mainly the legacy of Cernuschi (1896). Two others objects which entered the collection more recently are the legacy of the French artist, Colette Beleys (1911–1998). These two items were identified in 1880, through a notice of Ninagawa Noritane 蜷川式胤 (1835–82), a renowned antiquarian and important art collector of Japanese ceramics, who was in contact with the art dealer Siegfried Bing. Ninagawa was one of the founders of the Tokyo National Museum and also served as an intermediary in the constitution of the collections of the British Museum.

In this *vogue of Japonism*, the painter Raphaël Collin (1850–1916) was well known for his collections of ceramics in which many items of tea ceremony instruments could be found. Collin donated his collection to the Musée des Beaux Arts of Lyon, which, later on, entered the collection of the Parisian Musée Guimet. Beside his fascination for Japanese art, Raphaël Collin was also in direct contact with the one of the major Japanese artists of the time in Paris⁹. Kuroda Seiki 黒田清輝 (1866–1924), introduced to him by Hayashi,

6 MAUCUER, Michel, *Céramiques japonaises. Un choix dans les collections du Musée Cernuschi*, Paris: Musée Cernuschi, 2009, p. 16.

7 cf. MAUCUER, op. cit.

8 Wagner went to Nagasaki at the very first opening of Meiji (1868); he began to teach at Tokyo Institute of Technology in 1871. He was also actively involved in the Japanese participation in the World's fair in Vienna (1873) and Philadelphia (1876). MATSUBARA Ryūichi, "Les arts décoratifs japonais de 1900 à 1930. Entre tradition et changement", In: *Les arts décoratifs face à la modernité 1900/1930* [catalogue d'exposition], Paris: Maison de la Culture du Japon à Paris, 2010.

9 "Raphaël Collin et le Japon", In: MIURA, Atsushi, *Histoire de peinture entre France et Japon*, Tokyo: The University of Tokyo. Center for Philosophy, 2009, pp. 193–210.

works in his atelier. It is probably not a coincidence that Kuroda's painting *Lakeside* (1897) was displayed at the 1900's *exposition universelle* held in Paris.

In Praise for Imperfection and the Unfinished

The values of discontinuity, fragmentation and imperfection, deeply anchored in Tea ceremony, were first expressed in Okakura Tenshin's writings (*The Book of Tea*, 1906). In the first opening lines of his *Book of Tea*, originally published in English, Okakura already refers to the idea of imperfection when he reveals the philosophical background of tea ceremony (*chanoyu*) to his Western audience:

“Tea began as a medicine and grew into a beverage. /.../ Teaism is a cult founded on the adoration of the beautiful among the sordid facts of everyday existence. /.../ It is a essentially worship of the Imperfect, as it is a tender attempt to accomplish something possible in this impossible thing we know as life”¹⁰

Okakura's seminal book had been translated into German (*Das Buch vom Tee*) in 1919 and into French



Fig. 1 OKAKURA Kakuzô, *Le Livre du Thé*, (traduit de l'anglais par Gabriel Mourey), Coll. Orientales, Paris: Delpeuch, 1927.

(*Le Livre du Thé*) in 1927 (fig. 1)¹¹ and induced a change of vision, a shift of paradigms in the representation of Japanese aesthetics. In France, the translation made its way into the private library of Romain Rolland (1866–1944) who, through his knowledge of Indian culture, helped to spread the vogue of *Orientalism*. Romain Rolland was also a close friend of the composer and Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941).

Moreover, I would like to explore the specific relationship that had developed between Europe and Japan during the early years of the twentieth century. When Western avant-garde groups and crafts movements started their experimental investigations, similar renewals took place in Japan. Indeed, one can observe a parallel process: within the European context, one can observe issues related to handicrafts, the emergence of Arts & Crafts, and the ‘Gothic Revival’ movement in England or the *Deutscher Werkbund* movement in Germany. On the Japanese side, a

Revival’ movement in England or the *Deutscher Werkbund* movement in Germany. On the Japanese side, a

10 “The cup of Humanity”, OKAKURA Kakuzô, *The Book of Tea*, New-York, Duffield & Company, 1912. [1st publication, 1906].

11 OKAKURA Kakuzô, *Le Livre du Thé*, (traduit de l'anglais par Gabriel Mourey), Coll. Orientales, Paris: Delpeuch, 1927. The French translation was published in only 150 copies and Romain Rolland was in possession of the Series I. *Das Buch vom Tee* (Aus dem Englishen von Marguerite und Ulrich Steindorff), Leipzig: Insel-Verl., 1933 [first published in 1919]. These two books were in possession of Romain Rolland's personal Library. Furthermore, the first German publication of *Das Buch vom Tee* occurred prior to the French one, already in 1919.

similar interest occurs in the 1920's when the avant-garde movements manifest their interest in the renewal of handicraft work, which, from 1925 on, becomes a key issue of the mingei movement. This revision of the past associated with the creation of new forms appears retrospectively as a fundamental step towards the construction of "modernity" and even prepares the ground for the discourses on "national identity".

In her introduction to Okakura's book, *The Ideals of the East with Special Reference to the Art of Japan*, Sister Nivedita of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda (alias Margaret E. Noble (1867–1911) highlights this relationship:

"[...] We shall see in Japanese Art a recrudescence of ideals parallel to that of Medieval Revival of the Past century in England. What would be the simultaneous development in China? In India? For whatever influences the Eastern Island Empire must influence the others. Our author has been in vain if he was not conclusively proved that contention with which this little handbook opens, that *Asia, the Great Mother, is for ever One*."¹²

These lines obviously echo the first words of Okakura's book often cited:

"*Asia is one*. The Himalayas divide, only to accentuate, two mighty civilisations, the Chinese with its communism of Confucius, and the Indian with its individualism of the Vedas. But not even the snowy barriers can interrupt for one moment that broad expanse of love for the Ultimate and Universal, which is common thought-inheritance of every Asiatic race, enabling them from those maritime peoples of the Mediterranean and the Baltic, who love to dwell on the Particular, and to search out the means, not the end, of life."¹³

A Creative Reinterpretation of History: "*Shadows of the Past*"¹⁴

The refinement and detachment, as it was valued by the Tea Ceremony, can be primarily understood in an *unintentional* beauty of nature (*shizen no bi* 自然の美). The notion of detachment and ordinary life was especially encountered in the concept of *wabi* 侘び.¹⁵ It is said that an object previously used in everyday life, like an ordinary Korean bowl of rice, has been used by Sen no Rikyū within the tea ceremony. While the specific object has first been used for another purpose, through this displacement, the change of the object's

12 Introduction, by Sister Nivedita, of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda (Calcutta), p. xxiv). In: OKAKURA Kakuzo, *The Ideals of the East with Special Reference to the Art of Japan*. Rutland, Vermont & Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle co. Publishers, 1970. [originally published: New-York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1904].

13 Okakura, *The Ideals of the East*, op. cit. p. 1.

14 I borrow this title from the very incisive essay of Tankha, Brij (ed. by), *Okakura Tenshin and Pan-Asianism: Shadows of the Past*. Kent: Global Oriental Ltd., 2009.

15 Kōshirō Haga, "The *Wabi* Aesthetics Through the Ages", In: N. G. Hume (ed.), *Japanese Aesthetics: A Reader*. New York: State University of New-York Press, 1995, pp. 245–278.

context offered a certain distance, which allowed aesthetic appreciation. It has been touched by many hands, giving it the authenticity of the patina and traces of history. The value of an object, initially considered as “common”, will be considerably extended and almost considered as a work of art. The beauty of imperfection can be detected in objects or ceramics with irregularity or, even, missing parts.¹⁶

Furthermore, what is most interesting in Okakura's writings, from *The Book of Tea* to *The Ideals of the East*, is his polemical and political reinterpretation of history. The updating of the Sen no Rikyū ideal corresponds to a creative re-appropriation of the past: in a word, the invention of a “myth”. This *re-invention of tradition* will be the basis for the Japanese construction of modernity. As it has been emphasized by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, in his *Observations of Modernity*, modernity was built on the basis of a constant reinvention and the reactivation of the past:

« The problems of contemporary society are not problems in maintaining a heritage, whether in education or elsewhere. Much more important problem is the constant creation of *otherness* ».¹⁷

Our Modernity is based on these differences and similarities between *otherness* and *differentiation*. But what is “tradition” (*dentō* 伝統)? “Tradition” is always, for each given period of time, a kind of “re-invention”. [On this topic, and the construction of history as a ‘fiction’, see David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*]¹⁸. Inaga Shigemi also suggested to revisit tradition in order to use it as a still fertile ground for contemporary creation.¹⁹

Even modernity (モダン) understood as an eradication of the past and a so-called tabula rasa (creation of the ‘newness’), might be better described as a reinvented and *revisited tradition*. Furthermore, one may quote in this context the attempt of the Kyoto School to ‘overcome’ Modernity. Okakura with his desire to create an Asian identity thought Art (“*Asia is one*”) has been assimilated with this movement while his desire was maybe based on a different level. As it was pointed out by Karatani Kōjin, the use of Okakura's book in the context of ‘Overcoming Modernity’ was not related to the author's intentions, but rather, Okakura's writings were profoundly related to political meaning and the reinterpretation of the Indian philosophical notion of *Advaitism* (non-duality)²⁰.

In the early twentieth century, this aesthetic of irregularity is described by Yanagi Sōetsu (Muneyoshi) 柳宗悦 (1889–1961) in his book translated by his English collaborator Bernard Leach, *The Unknown Crafts-*

16 Hladik, Murielle, *Traces et fragments dans l'esthétique japonaise*. Wavres: Mardaga, 2008.

17 Luhmann, Niklas, *Observations in Modernity*, (trans. by William Whobrey), Stanford California, Stanford University Press, 1998 [*Beobachtungen der Moderne*, 1992, Westdeutsche Verlag], p. 3.

18 Lowenthal, David, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

19 Inaga Shigemi & Fister, Patricia (ed.), *Traditional Japanese Arts and Crafts in the 21st Century: Reconsidering the Future from an International Perspective*, Kyoto: International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 2005.

20 See, Karatani Kōjin, “Japan as Art Museum. Okakura Tenshin and Fenollosa”; In: Michael F. Marra (ed.), *A History of Modern Japanese Aesthetics*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001, pp. 43–52.

man. Rediscovering the beauty in the banal objects of everyday life, whose clear lines are the work of anonymous craftsmen, gave birth to the artistic movement of Mingei art. The tea bowl (*chawan* 茶碗) called “Ido Kizaemon” *Ido chawan* 井戸茶碗 or *Kizaemon* 喜左衛門 (Korea, Yi Dynasty, 16th century) is described by Yanagi Sōetsu as a “model of beauty.” The name refers to Takeda Kizaemon, an Osaka merchant and former owner of the bowl.²¹ Yanagi appreciated the irregularly shaped object with slight imperfections. It may be noted, however that it is difficult to reproduce artificially this very particular beauty: a desire to create artificial irregularity would be doomed to failure. Yanagi warns us against the incomprehension of those who seek to reproduce the irregularity unintentional. Its beauty would vanish.

A European *Desire for Imperfection*

If Japan can be seen from European eyes, in Karatani’s words, as an ‘*aesthetic fiction*’²², I would like to investigate into the conditions of a new and surprising appreciation of Japanese taste, which can only be understood through the preparation of a specifically European desire for imperfection.

While the colonial powers of the West exported their governmental and administrative systems to the countries under their rule, Japan, a country which was not dominated by the West—but rather developing its own colonialism in Asia—served as a model for radical otherness. The Western desire for imperfection was certainly stimulated by this radical otherness found in Japanese culture and especially the value of tea ceremony. *This desire* relies on a *sensitive substrate* elaborated and introduced by new visual experiments of avant-garde groups. By adopting the values of discontinuity, fragmentation and asymmetry, the artists of the avant-garde develop, in their own visual language a new type of ceramics, Art & Craft, design and architecture governed by the idea of *indetermination* and *je-ne-sais-quoi* (Jankélévich). When perfection is shattered by a slight *imperfection* then, in the words of the German philosopher Hannes Böhringer, it becomes “*more-than-perfect*”: imperfection transcends perfection (*Plum quam Perfectum*).

It is essential to note that even before the introduction of Japanese ceramics at the end of the nineteenth century, a specific appreciation of imperfection can be found in the eighteenth and nineteenth century painting. It is as if a “*seed of imperfection*” had been planted and would be dormant, germinating only once the surrounding context is ready for the emergence of the new. My hypothesis is that “Japonism” and the new appreciation for the ceramic’s imperfection beauty will be the determinant factor for further development of the seeds.

What could be the relationships between the Japanese Muromachi period very famous painter Sesshū Toyō 雪舟等楊 (1420–1506), the English eighteenth century crazy theoretician Alexander Cozens, who published a Treatise on painting using the art of blots as *A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing*

21 Importance of the pedigree of the bowl can be observed in its former owners.

22 Karatani Kōjin, op. cit. p. 44. As Karatani noticed, Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) wrote in his letters that he “wanted to look like a Japanese”. If European artists wanted to be able to look with ‘*Japanese Eyes*’, it corresponds to a shift of the gaze [un ‘*décentrement du regard*’].

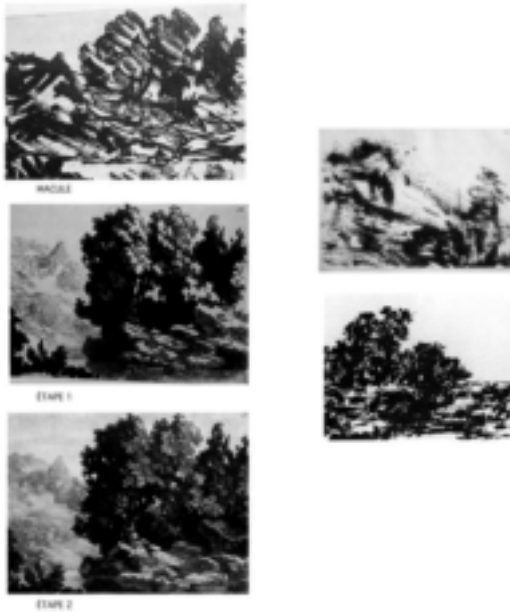


Fig. 2 Cozens, Alexander, *A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape* (1786).

Original Compositions of Landscape” (1786) (Fig. 2), and the French nineteenth century writer Victor Hugo? Belonging to radically different historical periods, there is maybe no evidence for *any* relation. Victor Hugo is well known as a writer, less known as a painter and as a ‘*Ruin lover*.’ He also wrote a fervent defense of the Chinese Yuanming Yuan gardens (圓明園). In 1861, he wrote a letter, in which he deplores the criminal and barbaric act of the destruction of the famous Old Summer Palace.²³ Whereas there is no sign of evidence for any direct historical relation, there is a kind of similar wish or desire for the Void: the beauty of the non-finished and the blank space which slowly permeated the realm of Western aesthetic.

In the very modern poem of Mallarmé “*Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard*”, first

published in 1897, again maybe *no evidence of any* Oriental or Japanese influence. But on this idea of *blank* used as a system of respiration we could find parallels with the use of Void and dynamism of the “blank space”—We could also find similar research for typology, accentuation of the void, diagonal and dynamism in all the avant-gardes from the Russian School Vhutemas to the Bauhaus experimentations.—Paul Claudel later describes Mallarmé’s poem and the verse as “a single idea isolated with white.” He also wrote, in an incisive manner, “the poem is made of white that remains on paper”²⁴ thus joining the notion of the white space (empty) in latency to be filled (*kūhaku* 空白). Claudel even published in 1927 the *Hyaku sen chō* 百扇帖, *One Hundred Sentences Written on Fans* (Fig. 3).²⁵ As a very sensitive ambassador for Japanese culture, Claudel referred directly to the history of calligraphy and poetry.

The French philosopher Jankélévich wrote on the concept of “*accident*” as an element of hazard and chance that can enter into the process of creation, thus giving us a sense of “*indetermination*” and “passage of time” characteristic of the process of creation and the art of the twelfth century.

Therefore, void, blank space, asymmetry and imperfection slowly permeated the realm of Western culture (fig. 4). Japanese aesthetics helped to affirm and consolidate a Western appreciation of imperfection which was already latently present in the history of Western art. But the *blooming appearance* of this phe-

²³ The Yuanming Yuan Gardens were burned and looted by British and French troops in 1860.

²⁴ Claudel Décrit le vers comme: «une idée isolée par du blanc»; «de poème est fait du blanc qui reste sur le papier»

²⁵ Claudel, Paul, *Cent phrases pour éventails* 『百扇帖』 (*Hyaku sen chō*), Tokyo, Ed. Koshiba (小柴印刷所), 1927.

nomena (*hana ga saki* 花が咲き) was only possible in the late nineteenth century. Ceramics associated with the tea ceremony were a decisive element in this new appreciation for the rough, unfinished and imperfect, allowing a radical renewal of artistic expression.

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Fig. 3 CLAUDEL, Paul, *Cent phrases pour éventails* 『百扇帖』 (*Hyaku sen chō*), Tokyo, Ed. Koshiba (小柴印刷所), 1927.



Fig. 4 Raku Tea bowl (1790?-XVIIIe s.) *Collection Ivan Lepage, Legacy 1963*. [reversible restoration with Paraloid B72 and glass microballs—imitating the old technique of restoration with lacquer (urushi)] © Musée de Mariemont, Belgique.

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