

Past, Present and Future: Comparing the aesthetic value of snow in Japan and the U.S.A.

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PANEL SYNOPSIS (General Theme)

In the academic and professional worlds we are constantly reminded that aesthetic value is not an important research topic because it is too vague and it provides no clear, straightforward answers. We no longer esteem aesthetic insight, yet this value, vague and ephemeral though it seems, is crucial to our lives. It transcends all artificial, human-made boundaries, and it permeates so-called "primitive" and "advanced" cultures alike. Still, we prefer to concentrate on technological advancement, even in the arts, for it is both fashionable and safe. Moreover, the focus of much current technology is on an ever receding future and it rests on the premise of constant dissatisfaction with the present. Clearly, we in the U. S., in Japan, and elsewhere, are no longer able to return to an existence devoid of modern technology. Yet it seems somehow sad to pass through our yesterdays, today's, and tomorrows without fully realizing, apprehending, and appreciating the extraordinary bounty of aesthetic experience that is quietly hiding in the background of our lives.

This panel will focus on the subtle, yet dynamic aesthetic qualities of snow as perceived by Japanese and Americans in nature and through their various art forms. The snow environment is a perfect venue for an interdisciplinary, intercultural approach. Together, the panel of four academics and professionals from Japan and the United States will provide distinctive, oftentimes contrasting, views. Japan has a long, distinguished history of snow appreciation while the U. S. has a short, sometimes spartan, yet surprisingly elegant one, particularly during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Comparing them can provide valuable insight, suggesting ways to prevent snow from disappearing from our aesthetic mind's eye as it disappears more quickly from our day to day lives, due to continuing technological efficiency. Snow is one of the few weather phenomenon that mingles past, present and future: memory, experience and anticipation. To many in the world who have never experienced its beauty and its danger, it is incomprehensible. Today, most of us take our landscapes for granted. Snow is perceived as a temporary inconvenience. Still, its impermanent, transient qualities lead us to perceive nature, time and space in a different way. By merging snowy weather conditions with aesthetic sensibility, our views of landscape, nature, the built environment and the arts are forever altered.

The question is. . . what is the future of snow appreciation in Japan and in the U. S.

where technology both melts snow from the roadways for the convenience of drivers and creates snow (ice, actually) for the convenience of skiers? This is not as idle a question as it initially sounds. Aesthetic appreciation continues to lose its value as developed countries lurch toward an environmentally desensitized future. Briefly stated, we appear moving toward the anaesthetic which, like snow, can be deadly. Will we eventually succeed in obliterating snow from our immediate environment? All three papers and the formal respondent's comments will explore these general themes within the context of their individual presentations.