

# The Language of the Five Senses in Japan

By Sylvie Ferrari-Gramegna

One of the reasons why foreigners are challenged and fascinated by Japan lies in the fact that the essence of its culture reveals itself in the five senses. I shall try to describe my inner feelings about Japan through my perception of the five senses as I have experienced them in the last four years.

The sense of sight is obviously the first one to enter into play when you set foot in Japan. While in my country Luxembourg, effort is made to preserve nature in its original state, the action of domesticating landscapes seems to be the ultimate goal here. Parks, *bonsai* trees and stone gardens as well as *Ikebana* landscapes always try to encapsulate nature. Even the architecture of teahouses bends to the rules of landscaping, as windows are placed in such a way to be the framework for a specific spot in a garden, as is perfectly illustrated in the Villa Katsura near Kyoto. Only hills and mountains, be it for religious or practical reasons, seem to be immune from the frenzy of man-shaped nature. In the overcrowded cities, different trees blooming all year round are an example of the Japanese people's attachment to the rhythm of the seasons. The tiny gardens or doorways of traditional restaurants are a refreshing refuge of silence and beauty. City residents manage to forget the often grey and sad surroundings and are able to focus on the few square meters of greenery popping up every now and then at a corner. In fact hidden beauty is one of the secrets of Japanese culture. Few foreigners know that the most elaborate part of a traditional dress is very often the one you don't see i.e. the inside pattern of the *kimono*. The same goes for the most expensive and elaborate lacquerware, where the finest work for a bowl is often in the interior part of the lid. When you raise the lid, not only will you discover the finest design of lac-



Photo : Imperial Household Agency

The architecture of the Villa Katsura, bends to the rules of landscaping

querware, but the food will be presented in the most exquisite way. Until it influenced French *nouvelle* cuisine dramatically, few foreigners paid attention to the artistic manner in which food was displayed in Japanese cuisine. One famous cook of the Meiji era was so dissatisfied with the plates and bowls available at that time to present his food, that he turned himself into a potter and devised the most suitable bowls and plates to boost the attractiveness of his dishes. In Japan, you eat with your eyes first, which brings me quite naturally to the sense of taste.

The best known feature of Japanese cuisine abroad is certainly *sushi*, which is becoming increasingly popular, as shown by the fact that *sushi* bars are opening all over the world, including in my home town Luxembourg. Eager foreign visitors of *sushi* bars try to memorize the names of the different fish, but few of them realize that a

major part of the secret lies with the quality of the rice. The best *sushi* I ever had was in Hokkaido where the chef used two different kinds of rice (*sasanishiki* and *koshihikari*) to produce a divine mixture both balanced and subtle in taste and texture. Seaweed is another crucial and simple ingredient of Japanese cuisine that fascinates me. The quality can be extremely diverse, but more interestingly, even the taste seems to call upon unknown senses of ours as was recently proved by American scientists. They showed that seaweed is neither acid nor bitter, neither salty nor sweet. It ranks in a fifth category of its own, as was often admitted for generations in Japan, but never proved scientifically until now. So I like to say that Japanese cuisine has one more taste to it than any other. But I certainly did not grasp all of the secrets of Japanese food. I still remain puzzled in front of the prices of

certain kinds of melon. I recently tried out many different sorts, including the musk melon, their price ranging from 500 yen to 10,000 yen, and was still not able to figure out if the difference of quality resided in the visual aspect of the skin, the color of the inside or the taste. I nevertheless remain in awe in front of the sophistication and simplicity of Japanese cuisine, which pays tribute to the special ingredients of every season. I hope that it can stay that way and will resist the temptation of using out of season vegetables, fruits and fish made available by today's modern transportation and technology.

To me cuisine is a crucial aspect of culture. If I had not fallen in love with Japanese cuisine, I would not have enjoyed the country as much as I do today. Even the simplest dishes like *soba* can be delicious. Unlike the Japanese though, I have not learnt to eat them with the appropriate noise, which brings me quite naturally to speak about the world of sounds in Japan.

The first sound that impressed me when I arrived in Tokyo in the middle of the summer of 1996, was the singing of the cicadas, called *Aburazemi* and *Minminzemi* who were echoing each other's chants infinitely. When I did not hear them any more, summer had vanished. Cicadas are competing in

precision with the five o'clock music that resounds everyday throughout Japan. Even in Tokyo this music easily overpowers the huge traffic which flows inexorably but silently as if all the cars were deprived of horns. But some places are famous for their noise which mirror the bubbly life inside like the Tsukiji Fish Market, *sushi* bars or *matsuri* celebrations, like the one in my neighborhood in Azabu Ju-ban. The only thing I still cannot get used to is the metallic and icy sound of *pachinko* machines, which some players become addicted to. Is their addiction to the game hidden or enhanced by the unbearable noise? Only in the spectacular *taiko* (drums) performances have I had the same impression that sound dominates the people. But to conclude on a more gentle note, what would Japan be without the sweet lullabies that my children have so eagerly learnt at school and have been singing ever since?



Foods are displayed in an elaborate manner in Japanese cuisine

It might strike you as a paradox to talk about the sense of touch in a country where the handshake is replaced by a bow. But so many objects are designed and crafted to perfection in order to be touched. The Japanese lacquerware reveals its unmatched beauty when you touch it. As pearls, touching the skin of a woman, absorb her perfume and sensuality, in the same way a *kimono* takes on a woman's shape and transmits to her and to someone touching the silk, a sense of magical voluptuousness.

Discovering the five senses as they express themselves in Japan, opens the door to sharing the feelings of the Japanese people. It also helps us to grasp the language of their hearts, a kind of sixth sense, which would obviously deserve another thought, and another article.

Discovering Japan's culture has enriched me and my family tremendously and has helped us build new bridges between Luxembourg and the country of the Rising Sun. May this article modestly contribute to increasing the shared reciprocal knowledge and admiration between our two countries. JTI

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Tsukiji Fish Market

From the five senses, smell is the one I probably need to find out more about, like for example incense. I nevertheless enjoy the typical smell of tatami mats or the scent of cypress trees (*hinoki*) particularly in Meiji Shrine or the perfume of the *Kaya* tree used to craft those magnificent go-boards.