

Japanese Beauty

By Shuji Takashina

As the English poet John Keats (1795–1821) wrote, “A thing of beauty is a joy forever.”

Love of beauty and the desire to celebrate beauty are very human traits, universal phenomena common to all of mankind. Mankind has sought since prehistoric times to create things of beauty, and it is these creations which we now call works of art.

However, even though the love of beauty is shared by all people everywhere, the definition of beauty differs from time to time, country to country, and person to person. Anyone who doubts this plurality need only look at the vast diversity of works of art and things of beauty displayed in the world's museums. It is a diversity in artistic output which speaks eloquently of the diversity in ideals of beauty. Moreover this human diversity is not restricted only to things of beauty or works of art but extends even to lifestyles and philosophical underpinnings.

In the West, things of beauty have traditionally been associated with strength, wealth and power, as illustrated by the Greek myth of the judgment of Paris. In this myth, Zeus commands the Trojan prince Paris to decide which of the goddesses deserves the Apple of Discord inscribed “to the fairest”: Hera, wife of Zeus; Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty; or Athena, goddess of wisdom and war. All of these goddesses are flawless beauties, and each promises to reward Paris if he will choose her: Hera with kingly power, Aphrodite with the love of the most beautiful mortal, and Athena with the wisdom to win in war. These promises show that the ancient Greek sense of beauty was also irrevocably linked to authority, strength and wealth. Aristotle articulated this in his famous dictum that beauty needs a touch of grandeur.

The Chinese character “bi” for beauty is literally a composite of the characters for sheep and big, indicating that a thing of beauty is akin to a fattened sheep. Another character for the same meaning has been derived from the concept of a deer with grand antlers. Both of these characters carry the sense that grandeur is beautiful.

By contrast, grandeur has not been an important part of the Japanese tradition of beauty. Instead, the Japanese tradition has been one of the small and weak as beautiful. Used today to mean beautiful, the term *utsukushi* used to be a term of



endearment for some small thing which the speaker felt affection for. One of the poets in the *Manyōshū* characterizes his feelings for his wife and children by calling them *utsukushi*, and the mid Heian period essayist Sei Shonagon (11th century) wrote in her *Makura-no-soshi* (Pillow book) “each and every little thing is beautiful (*utsukushi*).”

The idea of “small is beautiful” as part of the Japanese tradition is borne out by examination of the things which Japanese consider beautiful. One has only to look at the carefully manicured Japanese garden or the delicate *bonsai* to see that this is true. It is also evident in the delicate patterns etched on the sword guards, the genre screens which depict popular life in painstaking detail, and other Japanese arts. All are characterized by their minute attention to precise detail.

For example, the “Kyoto Scenes” which were so popular in the 16th and 17th centuries may look at first glance like simple pictures of urban life, yet each of the many figures depicted is a distinct individual. Rather than a sweeping mosaic, the total picture is one of accumulated detail. Typically a bird's eye view of the city, these Kyoto scenes show each individual and each minute touch with convincing reality and discrimination. Travelers, townspeople, minstrels, celebrants on their way to festivals, and everyone else is depicted in such close detail that their facial expressions show almost

what they are thinking, and even the patterns on their kimono are differentiated. This detail, executed in perfectionist minuteness and delicacy, is much of these scenes' appeal.

Along with its emphasis on the beauty of smallness, the Japanese sense of beauty is also characterized by what might be called the beauty of purity. If *utsukushi* was used in olden times as a term of affection meaning “darling,” it is only reasonable to ask what terms have been used for our modern sense of the beautiful. One such word was *kiyoshi*. The original senses of *kiyoshi* were “unsoiled,” “unencumbered,” “pure,” and “immaculate,” but it has come, in the Japanese sense of beauty, to also mean “flawless.” This is perhaps best reflected in Japanese art. In painting, for example, there are vast open spaces where Western painting would fill the entire canvas. Rather than to fill the entire canvas, the Japanese way is to depict the essentials and to leave the rest to the imagination. It is a beauty of emptiness. This is the diametrical opposite of the almost excessive Western obsession with wealth and richness as beauty.

This Japanese concept of beauty as something delicately crafted, something pure, is also reflected in Japanese life—and most likely in Japanese manufacturing as well. (This is the first of six parts.) ●



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