

# The Beauty of Transience

By Shuji Takashina

"Are we to look at cherry blossoms only in full bloom, the moon only when it is cloudless?" asks the well-known 14th century essayist Kenko Yoshida in his *Tsurezuregusa* (Essays in Idleness). Cherry blossoms and the moon have been popular aesthetic subjects in Japan for centuries, and the spring cherry blossom viewing and autumn moon viewing are valued seasonal rites even today.

Our ancestors, however, were not captivated solely by the glory of cherry trees in full bloom or the majesty of a full moon in a cloudless sky. As Yoshida remarked, the Japanese aesthetic also finds beauty in the transience of cherry blossoms past their peak and a moon partially obscured by clouds. If the resplendent cherry blossom and the unflawed orb of the full moon represent perfect beauty, the cherry blossom past its prime and the cloud-veiled moon might be termed imperfect beauty. Yet such imperfect beauty is highly prized in Japan. "Exquisite is the gossamer kimono slightly askew, the brush holder with its mother-of-pearl inlay chipped," Yoshida writes. While the Japanese appreciate the beauty of perfection, they have long prized a different kind of beauty as well: the beauty of impermanence and transience.

This kind of aesthetic did not develop in the West until the Romanticism of the modern era. From ancient Greece through the Renaissance and into the 18th century, the classical ideal of perfect beauty formed the basis of Western aesthetics. Eternal beauty was the goal of Western aesthetics, and the faintest trace of decline was thought to fatally flaw the beauty of perfection. The Japanese, however, perceived new beauty in the falling flower petals and the much-used box which has lost its mother-of-pearl inlay.

Underlying this Japanese aesthetic of imperfection is an understanding acceptance of time. Time erodes all things, causing decay and decline. In the classical ideal of eternal beauty, time is an enemy. That which is perfect must remain unaffected by the ravages of time. Works of art must



retain their beauty forever. For the Japanese, however, beauty need not be eternally unchanging. The changes that time brings create new beauty. In fact, time can be a vital factor in achieving a perfection that man cannot attain unaided. Well do I remember the words of my grandfather's gardener when I was a child. After working diligently for about two weeks, the gardener said: "My work is finished; but the garden is by no means complete. Now it is time to let nature do its work. In two or three years this garden will be right."

In Western gardening, particularly in the classical gardening of France such as seen at Versailles, the goal is to create a perfect and rational orderliness within nature. The craftsmanship is in achieving beauty by controlling nature. Behind this

ideal is the perception of nature as being disorderly and prone to decay over time if it is neglected. To the Western eye, nature is at its most beautiful when it is given order by man, and an unending battle must subsequently be waged against the ravages of time. The Japanese gardener has a very different ideal of beauty. The garden remains incomplete even after man has done all he can. Time will, of course, change the garden, but far from detracting from the garden's beauty, these changes enhance it and make it complete. Far from being an enemy, time is a staunch ally for the Japanese gardener. This flexible attitude shows trusting deference to a power that transcends human skills, and an appreciation for the beauty unique to each stage of change. The Japanese are sensitive to the changing of the seasons, are deeply moved by the fleeting beauty of a single moment, and have a special love for the transitory. They perceive beauty in decline. The joyous riot of cherry trees in full bloom on a bright and glorious spring day is beautiful. But just as beautiful are the bud just beginning to open and the spent flower allowing its petals to fall. In the same way, beauty can be found in mountains and hillsides stripped bare of foliage at the approach of winter. The *wabi* and *sabi* qualities so often cited as epitomizing Japanese beauty express this appreciation for the poignancy of impermanence.

This traditional sensibility lives on even in highly industrialized 20th century Japan despite its embrace of modern Western civilization. Toko Shinoda, a contemporary master calligrapher and impressionistic painter, demonstrated this in justifying her use of a silver background in a work. Asked whether oxidation wouldn't cause the silver to tarnish, she said: "All things change—and they are beautiful precisely because they change." Her words echo Yoshida's words of 650 years ago. This aesthetic is at the root of the Japanese ability to respond sensitively to the new even as they treasure the old. (This is the last of six parts.) ●

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