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Drinking from the Cup of Humanity

Tonight, I will be sharing with you a subjective comparison of Eastern and Western aesthetics. I have titled this paper Drinking from the Cup of Humanity.

Throughout this talk, I will be quoting or paraphrasing from Okakura Kakuzo's 1906 little tome *The Book of Tea*. I was first introduced to this book by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1955 when he gave me this 1912 copy during a visit to Taliesin West, his home and studio in Scottsdale, Arizona. The title for this lecture comes from the first chapter of Okakura's book, The Cup of Humanity, which speaks of the common struggle of both Eastern and Western societies to regain the "jewel of life;" the search for hope and peace, against the struggle for wealth and power in the shadow of what Okakura called, "egotism and vulgarity."

Here I first learned of Laotse, the Taoist and Zen influences on Asian aesthetics, and various principles of Japanese design. I would like to share a few of these concepts with you this evening.

Laotse is considered the first philosopher of the Taoist school. The *Te-Tao Ching*, "the book of flow and harmony", attributed to Laotse, is one of the most sacred texts of Taoism. His writings teach the philosophy of the *Tao*, or the *Way*. Chinese convention states that he lived in the 6th century BC. Laotse had a profound influence on the work of many artists including Frank Lloyd Wright who often referred to Laotse's metaphor of vacuum.

While exploring the polarities of Eastern and Western aesthetic philosophy, you will find that the principles and perspectives avowed in *The Book of Tea*, written one-hundred years ago, remain as true today, as they did in 1906. I would like to touch upon a few fundamental concepts; Vacuum, Harmony, Simplicity, Suggestion, Imperfection, Naturalness, Interval, and Minimalism.

Most of all, I want to wet your appetites for exploration; for exploration of Eastern aesthetics, for the exploration of meaningful art, for exploration of beauty in our environment, and for exploration of the possibilities for positive change in our own personal lives.

Okakura wrote, “The primeval man in offering the first garland to his maiden thereby transcended the brute. He became human in thus rising above the crude necessities of nature. He entered the realm of art when he perceived the subtle use of the useless.”

To fully appreciate the art and aesthetics of Japan, it is necessary to investigate a Japanese world view, and ideas about the nature of art, and Japanese influences on other cultures. The aesthetics of Japan developed in a unique fashion, partly because of its geographic location, a string of islands about 100 miles from Korea and 500 miles from China. Its isolation by the sea helped protect Japan from foreign invasion and allowed its rulers to control contact with other nations.

During long periods of self-imposed isolation, art forms and aesthetic ideas developed that are specifically Japanese. Over the centuries, when interactions with foreign cultures occurred, they influenced the traditional arts and aesthetics of Japan. For the purposes of this discussion, the focus will be on what remained essentially Japanese.

Contrasting Western and Japanese art form is perhaps only possible if we understand the long European tradition. I will attempt to clarify the difference between Japanese and Western art by trying to illustrate the essence of each.

The great love and respect of nature and partiality towards the ever changing state of our world are characteristic of Japanese art: nature being neither uniform nor repetitive, learning from it has resulted in a rich diversity, and this learning process from nature accounts for those characteristics of Japanese art which are generally lacking in European art.

Western aesthetic philosophy, at least from the Renaissance onwards, endeavors to attain truthfulness and objectivity through a cycle of repeated progress and failure, and makes use of models because it values realism; it is, therefore, in constant danger of becoming nothing more than a mirror reflecting its surroundings. In contrast, Eastern culture is more established and, although lacking in dramatic change, possesses complex depth through the many design concepts we will explore here tonight.

Taoism

For me, the chief contribution of Taoism to Asiatic life has been in the realm of aesthetics. Chinese historians have always spoken of Taoism as the "art of being in the world," for it deals with the present--ourselves.

The art of life lies in a constant readjustment to our surroundings. Taoism accepts the mundane as it is and tries to find beauty in our world of imperfections.”

Laotse, a contemporary of Confucius, was searching for a way that would avoid the constant feudal warfare and other conflicts that disrupted society during his lifetime.

Taoism started as a combination of psychology and philosophy but evolved into a religious faith in 440 BC when it was adopted as a state religion.

Tao can be roughly translated into English as path, or the way. It is basically indefinable. It must be experienced. It refers to a power which envelops, surrounds and flows through all things, living and non-living. The Tao regulates natural processes and nourishes balance in the Universe. It embodies the harmony of opposites (i.e. there would be no love without hate, no light without dark, no male without female.)

In Taoism, less is more, and non-interference with nature allows the creative process of the universe to flow through the artist.

Zen

Many unique Japanese concepts and esthetics involved in traditional Japanese art stem from Zen Buddhism. Its influence on the art and architecture of the country have been impressive and lasting.

Esthetic values which are believed to be uniquely Japanese in origin such as simplicity, naturalness, refined elegance, subtlety and the use of the suggestive rather than the descriptive mode of communication are either products of Zen thought or were reinforced by it. It is said to be impossible to describe Zen in words since the doctrine denies this possibility. The doctrine rejects intellectually devised images in favor of direct experience.

Shortly after the doctrine's introduction into Japan, its monks began the construction of gardens. The essential design elements included in these gardens came to be the main elements of what is know today as a traditional Japanese garden. Naturally the employment of these elements provided the monks with an opportunity to express the "Way of Zen". In them, Zen principles were translated into very special aesthetics.

In order to evoke the criteria of Zen aesthetics, the suggestive mode of expression became a main approach to Japanese design. Specifically, the artist employs the concept of hide and reveal, since Japanese believe that in expressing the whole the interest of the viewer is lost. The garden designer, for example, must motivate the viewer to achieve empathy with the garden and use suggestive means to arouse the viewer's imagination, making possible the expansion of the garden beyond its physical bounds.

Vacuum – Laotse

Okukura reminds us of Laotse's often employed metaphor of the Vacuum. "He claimed that only in vacuum lay the truly essential. 'The reality of a room, for instance, was to be found in the vacant space enclosed by the roof and the walls, not in the roof and walls themselves.' The usefulness of a water pitcher dwelt in the emptiness where water might be put, not in the form of the pitcher or the material of which it was made. Vacuum is all potent because it is all containing. In vacuum alone motion becomes possible. One who could make of himself a vacuum into which others might freely enter would become master of all situations."

Frank Lloyd Wright employed this philosophy throughout his career, and placed it on a prominent wall in the Performance Pavilion he designed and built at Taliesin West.

Harmony (Wabi-Sabi)

The primary aesthetic concept at the heart of traditional Japanese culture is the value of harmony in all things. The Japanese world view is nature-based and concerned with the beauty of studied simplicity and harmony with nature. This Japanese aesthetic of the beauty of simplicity and harmony is called wabi-sabi.

Many believe wabi-sabi to be the most conspicuous and characteristic feature of traditional Japanese beauty and it occupies roughly the same position in the Japanese pantheon of aesthetic values as do the Greek ideals of beauty and perfection in the West.

Wabi expresses the spirit of an object. Sabi defines time or the ideal image of an object; the closest definition might be "patina." While a stone lantern may be one of a kind, it lacks that ideal image. The Japanese constantly strive to find that balance.

> Wabi-sabi is the beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete.
> It is the beauty of things modest and humble.
> It is the beauty of things unconventional.

The concepts of wabi-sabi address the issues of time and space, and symbolize aesthetic simplicity and represent the fundamental Zen principles of harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility.

Simplicity (Kanso)

Another important concept in Japanese art, architecture and landscape is "simplicity" or kanso. In this concept, beauty, grace, and visual elegance are achieved through omission and elimination. Simplicity must not be confused with plainness which is, in many cases, monotonous or a lack of refinement. Simplicity means the achievement of maximum effect with minimum means.

"Taoist theory prescribes a continued need of change in decorative theme. The tea-room, for example, is completely empty, except for what may be placed there temporarily to satisfy an aesthetic mood. A specific art object is chosen for the occasion, and everything else is selected and arranged to enhance the beauty of the principal theme. One cannot listen to different pieces of music at the same time, a real comprehension of the beautiful being possible only through concentration upon some central motif. Thus the system of decoration in the tea-room is opposed to that of the West, where the interior of a house is often converted into a museum." Explained Okakura, "To a Japanese, accustomed to simplicity of ornamentation and frequent change of decoration, a Western interior permanently filled with a vast array of pictures, statuary, and bric-a-brac gives the impression of mere vulgar display of riches."

The recognition of the power and implications of the Japanese concept of simplicity has been embraced by many familiar Western artists. I would like to share with you a few thoughts by several individuals that you might find familiar:

Hans Hofman wrote;

> ”The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak.”

Albert Einstein;

> “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.”

Henry David Thoreau:

> ”Our life is frittered away by detail... Simplify, simplify, simplify! ... Simplicity of life and elevation of purpose.”

William Morris;

> “Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.”

And finally, Leonardo DaVinci said that;

> “Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.”

Suggestion

The suggestive mode of expression is another key Zen aesthetic, symbolizing the Japanese belief that in expressing the whole the interest of the viewer is lost.

In art the importance of this principle is illustrated by the value of suggestion. In leaving something unsaid the beholder is given a chance to complete the idea and thus a great masterpiece irresistibly rivets your attention until you seem to become actually a part of it. A vacuum is there for you to enter and fill up the full measure of your aesthetic emotion. The Taoist and Zen artists believed that, “True beauty could be discovered only by one who mentally completed the incomplete.”

The followers of Zen aimed at direct communion with the inner nature of things, regarding their outward accessories only as impediments to a clear perception of Truth. It was this love of the Abstract that led the Zen to prefer black and white sketches to the elaborately colored paintings of the both Western art and the classic Buddhist School.

Landscapes, birds, and flowers were the favorite subjects for depiction rather than the human figure, the latter being present in the person of the beholder himself.

Memories long forgotten all come back to us with a new significance. Our mind is the canvas on which the artists lay their color; their pigments are our emotions; their chiaroscuro the light of joy, the shadow of sadness.

The great masters never forgot the value of suggestion as a means for taking the spectator into their confidence. In the quest for genuine Japanese aesthetic relevance, creativity was encouraged and uniformity of design was considered fatal to the freshness of imagination.

Celebration the Imperfect

In Chapter 4, Okakura depicts, “The tea-room (the Sukiya) as an Abode of the Unsymmetrical inasmuch as it is consecrated to the worship of the Imperfect, purposely leaving some thing unfinished for the play of the imagination to complete.”

An ancient Oriental legend cautioned that all great works of art should leave an element of imperfection in the design as an homage to the Gods.

Taliesin, Frank Lloyd Wright's home and studio in Spring Green, Wisconsin, burned several times with three major fires in 1914 from arson, 1925 from an electrical short and in 1952 from a lightning strike. After one major fire destroyed most of the structures, a reported asked Mr. Wright if he had a thought on why the buildings were so plagued. On reflection Mr. Wright recalled the ancient Zen belief and stated that in designing Taliesin he had apparently, inadvertently omitted this ancient admonition of leaving some element of imperfection in his design.

On another occasion, when a fire again burned most of the residence but stopped before it reached the studio containing his work, he remarked that, "It was as if God had questioned his character, but not his work."

Naturalness (Shizen)

The aesthetic concept of naturalness or shizen rejects the use of elaborate designs and over refinement. Talented jazz musicians, for example, know never to overplay but instead to be forever mindful of the other musicians and find their own space within the music and within the moment they are sharing. Graphic designers show restraint by including only what is necessary to communicate the particular message for the particular audience. Restraint is difficult, but subsequently, becomes a powerful element of beauty. Complication and elaboration are easy...and, unfortunately, too common.

Interval (Ma)

In our Western society we have been taught to think of space as the distance between objects. We often refer to this space as "empty." In Japan this is called "ma," or an interval in time and space. The Japanese see this as much more than mere blank space, and attempt to give it meaning, to recognize the forms and resultant forms and attend to the organization of these intervals. This *spatial* concept is sensed gradually via intervals of *spatial* depiction. It is a synchronized consciousness of shape and void springing from a focus of image. It is not in reality created by the compositional elements themselves, but takes place in the imagination of the viewer who encounters these compositions. This space defines the elements around it, and is also defined by the elements surrounding it. It is the true spirit of in and yo, that which many of us know by the Chinese words yin and yang. Without nothing, you cannot have something. This is a difficult point to grasp, but it is a central tenet of Japanese aesthetics that addresses both time and space. It has been defined as experiential place understood with emphasis on interval. It can be seen in Japanese gardens, architecture, flower and food arrangements, Japanese theatre, music, calligraphy and painting.

In music it is seen in the spacing of the notes, in theatre as emphasis or dramatic pauses in dialog, in architecture and the graphic arts the negative space is used to create drama and/or repose.

Minimalism

Okakura also laments on the wanton waste of flowers among Western communities. He writes, “The number of flowers cut daily to adorn the ballrooms and banquet-tables of Europe and America, to be thrown away on the morrow, must be something enormous; if strung together they might garland a continent. Beside this utter carelessness of life, the guilt of the Flower-Master becomes insignificant. He, at least, respects the economy of nature, selects his victims with careful foresight, and after death does honor to their remains. In the West the display of flowers seems to be a part of the pageantry of wealth,--the fancy of a moment.”

Tea and Flowers

Okakura also clarifies that, “The tea- and flower-masters do not cull at random, but carefully select each branch or spray with an eye to the artistic composition they have in mind. They would be ashamed should they chance to cut more than were absolutely necessary. It may be remarked in this connection that they always associate the leaves, if there be any, with the flower, for the object is to present the whole beauty of plant life. In this respect, as in many others, their method differs from that pursued in Western countries. Here we are apt to see only the flower stems, heads as it were, without body, stuck promiscuously into a vase.

When a tea-master has arranged a flower to his satisfaction he will place it on the tokonoma, the place of honor in a Japanese room. Nothing else will be placed near it which might interfere with its effect, not even a painting, unless there is some special aesthetic reason for the combination. It rests there like an enthroned prince, and the guests or disciples on entering the room will salute it with a profound bow before making their addresses to the host.”

Ikebana (Kado)

In ikebana and Taoism, less is more, and non-interference with nature allows the creative process of the universe to flow through the artist.

Here, it is essential to understand the attributes and growth patterns of the plants being utilized. Yet a mere understanding of the characteristics of a given flower is not enough to arrive at harmony in ikebana.

There must be respect for the *ki* (spiritual energy or life force) of its foliage and structure. Harmony is achieved in the form of a refined combination of understanding and respect.

Asymmetrical balance is used to evoke a feeling of naturalness. Since nature involves the motion of continuous change, ikebana avoids a static feeling: exactly what is created by using a rigid, symmetrical balance used in Western flower displays.

In Western flower arrangement, an equally long branch might be placed on the opposite side, which would negate asymmetrical balance and evoke a rigid, static, symmetrical feeling. Ikebana's irregular balance makes use of combinations of contrasting elements

that are in keeping with the spirit of yin and yang. Basic yin and yang patterns of proportion consist of the concepts of "few vs. many" along with "large vs. small," and the fundamental number of materials utilized is odd (seven or five or three), which promotes asymmetrical balance.

Rikiu Morning-glories

This reminds me of one of the many stories told about Rikyu. Rikyu became the tea master for the warlord Hideyoshi Toyotomi, a difficult and powerful man. Hideyoshi heard of the wonders of Rikyu's garden, of the then very rare morning glory, and expressed a desire to see the flowers. As a result, Rikyu invited the warlord to tea. When Hideyoshi arrived and walked down the path to the tea house, not a flower was in sight. Upon entering the tea house, Hideyoshi saw a single, beautiful morning glory displayed on the alcove. Rikyu had cut down all the other morning glories so that full attention could be focused on one single blossom.

Topiary and Bonsai

Contrast of aesthetic perspective is obvious when relating the Western practice of Topiary with the Eastern art of Bonsai.

Topiary

Topiary dates from Roman times, and Julius Caesar has been credited with introducing the first topiary to Roman gardens, which have been described as “elaborate figures of animals, inscriptions and obelisks in clipped greens.”

From its European revival in the 16th century, topiary has historically been associated with the formal gardens and terraces in the estates of the European elite and as features in cottage gardens. Traditional topiary forms use foliage pruned and/or trained into geometric shapes: balls or cubes, obelisks, pyramids, cones, spirals, and the like. Representational forms depicting people, and animals, have also been popular.

Bonsai

The modern-day art of bonsai originates from China over two thousand years ago. It was brought to Japan by imperial embassies to Tang China nearly 1200 years ago.

In the art of bonsai a sense of aesthetics, care, and patience come together. The plant, the shaping and surface of the soil and the selected container all come together to express "heaven and earth in one container.” The forces converging in successful bonsai are shin-zen-bi, or truth, essence and beauty.

These traditional Japanese aesthetic concepts, at their deepest level, touch something universal in the human heart that can relate to people of all cultures

Since these principles are derived from a genuine awareness of humankind's intimate connection with the universe, they are true rather than contrived. In other words, they are not an aesthetic based upon what was fashionable at a certain point in Japanese history.

They will never fall out of fashion, since they mirror the eternal aspect of nature. Understanding harmony, simplicity, and impermanence is never-ending, much like the infinite universe itself, and bona fide comprehension comes as we discover and reflect these states in ourselves.

In conclusion, I hope that I have provided fodder to stimulate your appetites for exploration into areas that might provide you greater internal peace, greater enjoyment of the beauty of everyday life, and for exploration of the possibilities for positive change.

Resources

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