Japanese Aesthetic

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There are certain concepts found in Japanese culture which constitute a different conception of taste than those with which we are familiar in the West. Any comparison and/or contrast of these concepts, which comprise a Japanese aesthetic, with Western aesthetic notions needs to take into account three crucial features: 1 the aesthetic sensibilities underlying each culture's aesthetic concepts; 2 the grounding of the concepts in matrices of beliefs; 3 the "logics" governing the use of terms used to mark the presence or absence of aesthetic features.

In what follows, the key Japanese aesthetic concepts of shibui, jimi, hade, sabi, wabi, miyabi and yugen will be explained and illustrated as well as set in opposition to Western counterparts. "Shibui" is the highest term of aesthetic praise for the Japanese; it will be our starting point.

Where in the West, the beautiful object is often an attention-getter,[1] for the Japanese sensibility the ultimate in beauty, shibui, is anything but a quality that will attract attention. The term "shibui" has its origins in a form of life-style that government leaders pursued during the period in Japanese history between 1330 and 1520.[2] The term was chosen to indicate a distance from the rich and ostentatious. Its literal meaning is that of the astringent. The contrast involved is between the flavor of a fruit with a sweet quality and the flavor of an unripened persimmon which is puckery, harsh and biting. From this relatively simple and clear contrast, the concept of shibui has developed over time into a complicated notion composed of a number of subtle and interrelated features.

Restraint is one of the ingredients in shibui. Shibui art objects are unobtrusive, unostentatious and modest with understatement as a characteristic style. An underlying notion is that the less powerful object will probably be the more artistically effective. Another core feature is hiddenness. The appreciator who comes in contact with shibui finds his or her taste is left unsatiated by the shibui object. Shibui's ever hidden aspect creates a lingering attraction for more since the object is so fashioned that it reveals only enough of itself to impel one to seek additional qualities of what has been found pleasing but which are not readily perceivable. Another core element in shibui is simplicity. Shibui designs are left unadorned and incomplete, allowing much scope for the appreciators to exercise their imagination. The would-be appreciator of a Noh play or a Zen sand and rock garden finds his/her imagination taxed to the limit by the extremely minimal suggestiveness encountered.

These qualities of simplicity, hiddenness, and restraint do not exist independently in an object that is correctly said to be shibui. Indeed these shibui-making features interpenetrate one another. The simplicity in style works hand in hand with restraint; for to leave a design unadorned is to exercise restraint; for one who would incorporate a hidden aspect into a work of art, simplicity and restraint are ready-made means to this objective; the simple and restrained surface invites the appreciator to look for more, for something not readily apparent, for something hidden.

While on the surface an object with shibui is simple and austere, it would be a mistake to think that shibui in any way involves a slighting of craftsmanship. In fact, much respect for craft as well as for the material crafted is evident in the shibui object. This aspect of production value should not, however, lead one to be surprised to find also a shibui tendency to be attracted to the unfinished, the incomplete and the fragmented. Both respect for craftsmanship and a taste for the incomplete arise together in the shibui sensibility.

To fall short in achieving shibui is to have the quality of jimi. When jimi is present there is an overemphasis on the restrained, sober side on a continuum on which restraint resides. When objects are jimi, they often become too proper and too monotonous. For instance, a youth who always dresses in a brown coat, brown shoes and a beige shirt and trousers would be an ideal case for the drabness characteristic of jimi.

To overshoot shibui on the other end of the continuum would bring about an instance of hade. Bright in color, ostentatious in design, hade commands recognition. It demands attention due to the over all effect in gaudiness and showiness. The Toshogu Shrine in Nikko, Japan is a famous instance of hade architecture, with its clashing colors, intricate carvings covering every inch of the structure and its capacity to overwhelm the onlooker. Shibui objects may have presence, an authoritativeness but they do not overwhelm; instead their simple, restrained, austere and hidden qualities beckon the appreciator to look more deeply.

Quite closely associated with shibui are the concepts of sabi and wabi. When an emphasis on the value of aging is added to shibui-making features, the object is sabi. The term "sabi" (like "Shibui") has undergone an evolutionary development vis-a-vis its meaning. The courtiers of the Heian period (794-1192) particularly loved what was new and fresh. The Medieval Japanese, on the other hand, developed a strong sensitivity for things which showed signs of wear and aging- the withered bough, the broken branch, the fallen flower, the scent of chrysanthemums with their musty quality. By contrast, one may think of the Western preference for the perfumed quality of a rose. The Medieval concept of sabi is found in contemporary Japan's aesthetic language. One who perceives sabi quality in an object perceives it in a way associated with a quality of depth which comes from aging. Time may have taken its toll on the object yet in an important way it is nevertheless richer for this process. The state of mind underlying an appreciation for aging is not simply a passive acceptance of aging but also involves a sense of transcendence to a positive, affirmative attitude where one has a feeling of affection for the thing that is aged.

Wabi centers around the attraction to an unadorned, subdued and imperfect form. One might describe wabi as "...the feeling of melancholy and humbleness which comes from a realization of one's insignificance in nature's scheme."[3] To an outsider, a tea ceremony conducted in a spirit of wabi may seem unnecessarily spare. However, wabi involves casting away all that is unnecessary in order to achieve a peaceful state of mind. Poverty of manner and expression is essential to this process. In a teahouse, one will typically find an enclosure made of bare wood with furnishing, lighting and activity shorn of embellishments. Quietness, solitude and simplicity characterize this austere ceremony, with a feeling of serenity ideally pervading the setting and the experience. In addition to spareness, wabi involves clarity of image and technique. It suggests an uncluttered and precise attitude in which the individual gains a clear awareness of nature. Examples of objects exemplifying wabi are a plain twig in a flower arrangement, the coarse black cotton of a kimono and the spare clarity of a rock and sand garden.

Growing out of restraint as a fundamental aesthetic principle and closely allied with, but distinguished from, shibui is the concept of miyabi. Aesthetic tastes so far described may give the impression of a lack of color and luster.

There is, however, a more ostentatious strain in Japanese taste. "Miyabi" stands for high aristocratic elegance, refinement and sophisticated grandeur. Paradoxically, the concept of miyabi may have its roots in Buddhism. Though mention of Buddhism calls to mind contemplative repose and severity of life-style, the religion gained favor among the Japanese due to its resplendent ceremony and the splendor of its ornate architecture. During the Heian period, members of the aristocratic society, enjoying the sumptuous living of the time but being somewhat restrained by the strong influence of Buddhist pessimism, expressed themselves in a rich and elegant splendor without being overly immoderate.

When appreciators step into the shoin of Nishi-Honganji, a shrine in Kyoto, Japan, they will be confronted by the splendid paintings on its panels and screens, as well as the ceilings of its various chambers. Gorgeous as they are, however, they do not aim to bedazzle the viewers, for they are done in a restrained, highly disciplined manner in achieving their sophisticated elegance. Rich but not gaudy, colorful but not complex, the total effect is one of regal fineness. Many other artistic treasures of the Japanese culture may be described as miyabi-the glittering stateliness of the golden Pavilion, the ornate but unobtrusive Nijo Castle, colorfully brocaded obi, and lacquerware with contrasting mother-of-pearl inlay. Restraint in the use of color, line and design are discernible; undisciplined excess is undesirable; clash of color and design are meticulously shunned.

Finally, there is the term "yugen" which of all Japanese aesthetic terms is the most deeply embedded in the metaphysical/religious tradition of Zen Buddhism. Many writers commenting on the Japanese aesthetic have argued that Western sensibility has not been attuned to a quality like yugen because it has not gravitated toward the drawing of distinctions and the naming of qualities that would be involved in its identification. For this reason, to the Westerner, yugen is an elusive, subtle and obscure feature of things. Accordingly, a characteristic approach in explaining the meaning of "yugen" has been to use metaphors and other imagery to guide thought and perception by indirect means to a certain distinctive sort of experience.

Yugen was given prominence in the Japanese aesthetic by Zeami Motokiyo (1364-1444). In his writings about the Noh theatre, yugen was referred to as a quality of gentle gracefulness. Eventually, due to the incorporation of a transcendent characteristic, the term became associated with other concepts of the Japanese aesthetic such as sabi. In this enriched state, yugen was more than simply a quality of an actor's movements and gestures, becoming indicative of something metaphysical, hidden and profound.

In the spirit of explaining the meaning of "yugen" by indirection, we are told that yugen is obscure, dark, half-revealed, and is tinged with wistful sadness.[4] The rock garden at Ryoanji is characterized as possessing the yugen quality in that it embraces the supposed opposites of radiance and the abysmal.[5] A sense of mystery is also said to attach to yugen through its association with Zen:

> The world this imagery evokes is a ...tranquil world in which nothing remains immutably fixed, a world of mist, rain and wind, of snow and withering flowers. It is much too fragile and elusive a world to be rationally understood or deliberately controlled.[6]

Andrew Tsubaki, in tracing the origins of yugen in its transmission to Japan from Chgina points out:

> The original Chinese term yugen meant to be so mysteriously faint and profound as to be beyond human perception and understanding. Here the term was employed in expressing an idea found in Taoism and Buddhism. As such it contained a philosophical character from the beginning.[7]

Furthermore, emphasis has been placed on a connection of yugen with a consciousness of the perishability of things. The Japanese sensibility expresses itself in a "preference for varieties of beauty which most conspicuously betrayed their impermanence."[8] Quite contrary to the Western craving for objects in the finest of condition, the Japanese aesthetic dictates taking satisfaction in those things that reveal their fragility and their quality of aging. Yugen is apprehended only in a certain state of being-one where consciousness is disinterested. It is 'recognized only with the absence of the self-centered self or subject."[9]

Yugen is like shibui in being the highest form of beauty, but it is different in that unlike shibui it refers to a quality which cannot be expressed in words. Its occurrence depends upon the existence of qualities beyond those features that can be perceived or described; hence the constant references to the obscure, the mysterious and the profound. It involves religiously grounded doctrines such as the dialectic of abundance and nothingness, the entirely natural and the wholly spiritual as well as a notion that it is fully recognizable only to one who can overcome a self-centeredness about his/her perception of nature.

With the foregoing discussion of the Japanese aesthetic in mind, the following comparisons/contrasts with aesthetic conceptions of the West may be made: First, with only the exception of yugen, regardless of the aesthetic term involved, the same core set of features are conditions governing application of the Japanese aesthetic terms (e.g., restraint, simplicity, hiddenness, etc., with only emphasis, slight variation, subtle nuance determining which of the terms apply). How different is the Western case where quite contrasting sets of conditions govern the application of terms used to mark aesthetic features of objects. Roughly equivalent Western concepts for shibui, jimi, hade, and miyabi might be beauty, dullness, garishness, elegant refinement. Think how radically different the features are that would count only towards an application of each of these Western aesthetic terms.

Second, though beauty and shibui are prima facie value characteristics (that is, their presence in an object counts only towards a positive aesthetic evaluation, beauty in the Western conception is not a mean point on a continuum with dullness and garishness as extremes. Indeed, "dull" and "garish" when used to mark the presence of aesthetic features in an object are typically used in a value-neutral way. The context of the object determines whether dullness or garishness contributes to aesthetic goodness. Also, there is no implicit comparison/contrast with beauty as a measure for what it is to be dull or garish. In the Japanese case, shibui is, however, the measure of such qualities, with their departure or variance from its ideal state being central to what it is to be either jimi or hade i.e., coming up short or overshooting shibui.

Third, though there does exist in the West some appreciation for the aesthetically successful use of restraint or of simplicity or of having important hidden aspects in certain art objects, the combination of these characteristics, as is found in an object with shibui, does not have the impact on consciousness in the West that it does for the Japanese. Furthermore, the qualities of perishability and depth owing to aging emphasized in sabi and the appreciation for poverty characteristic of wabi have little place in Western art, except perhaps in those works which are at least in part derivative from the East.

Fourth, shibui and yugen occupy a preemptive position at the center of art for the Japanese. Both "shibui" and "yugen" are terms of highest aesthetic praise. In Western aesthetic conceptions, beauty and profundity (rough equivalents for shibui and yugen, respectively) are but two of many ways to achieve aesthetic excellence. Other qualities are not measured against them and certainly do not radiate, as it were, out of them. Moreover, "shibui," besides serving double duty as a term used to mark an aesthetic feature of an object as well as a term of highest aesthetic praise, also can be used as a style term. Shibui style is coveted for many stylistic purposes such as in garden arrangement, for interior decoration and in architectural design. There is no corresponding "beautiful style" in Western conceptions.

Finally in understanding the conditions for applying "shibui" or "sabi" or "wabi" or "yugen," we are led far beyond what would be taken as relevant aesthetically in the West to consider matters having to do with the nature of reality, finitude and self-identity. Not just any restraint or just any simplicity or just any hiddenness will do. "The characteristics forming the core of the Japanese aesthetic are deeply embedded in and are ultimately grounded by a matrix of religious beliefs. In the West one can, ordinarily, identify the conditions contributing to the presence of beauty or garishness, et. al., without touching on matters of religious-metaphysical import. That Japanese aesthetic concepts must be set against such a background marks a distinctive feature of their unique aesthetic sensibility.[10]

Notes and References

1 Sircello, Guy: *A New Theory of Beauty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975) p. 19. 2. These leaders were called Ashikaga Shoguns.

3. Hall, John and Richard Beardsley: Twelve Doors to Japan (New York: McGraw Hill, 1965) p. 303.

4. Deutsch, Eliot, *Studies in Comparative Aesthetics*: Monograph No. 2 (Honolulu: Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy, University Press of Hawaii, 1975) p. 29.

5. Deutsch, ibid., p. 34.

6. Kaula, David, "On Noh Drama," *Tulane Drama Review*, September 1960, pp. 69-70.

7. Tsubaki, Andrew, "Zeami and the Transition of the concept of Yugen: A Note on Japanese Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, fall 1971, p. 58.

8. Keene, Donald, "Japanese Aesthetics," *Philosophy East and West*, July 1969, p. 305.

9. Deutsch, op.cit., p. 33.

10. The content of the this essay developed during a series of course offerings with Noboru Inamoto on Japanese film and culture at the University of Southern California.[21]

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