

A Different Kind of Beauty: Wabi and Kintsugi

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Abstract

Symmetry and geometrical perfection are seldom seen in the natural world. The aesthetic concept of Wabi draws attention to the state of things "as they are" and appreciation of this natural state. It calls for the shift in one's mindset and highlights a different, perhaps, less conventional kind of beauty. This beauty has a lasting effect and is a process rather than a moment. One needs to stop, slow down and take their time to appreciate. Wabi constitutes the place of rest and calm rather than unattainable perfection. Wabi often refers to the realm of humans – all different and therefore able to fit together in a more cohesive way rather than in the perfect world, where strict proportions and rules are imposed. Kintsugi is the way to repair objects highlighting the repairs with gold, silver or red. It implies beauty despite repair, not because of it. While one cannot eliminate breakage itself once it has happened, one can build and rebuild beyond the accident. But probably most of all rebuild one's attitude and develop the appreciation of a different kind of beauty despite and beyond repairs. Accept repairs as part of this object and experience it in a different, more human way. This paper will focus on application of Wabi, Kintsugi and other Japanese aesthetic concepts as pedagogical methods beyond their immediate and traditional place in art.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Culture, Chanoyu, Mindfulness, Contemplation, Intercultural Studies

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Introduction

Aesthetics and appreciation of beauty not only permeate the whole of Japanese culture but also are the foundation of the Japanese national identity. There is a wide range of beauty and forms of its appreciation throughout Japanese cultural history. While they may be seen as uniquely Japanese, it doesn't mean that they cannot be appreciated, admired or accepted, learned and even recreated by the non-Japanese. Moreover, the globalization of Japanese approach to beauty and the beautiful lies not only in the introduction of forms, materials or specifically artistic approaches. It is the application of so called "Japanese beauty" to a much wider range of life and living that makes its aesthetic concepts so valuable for other cultures. I suggest that many Japanese aesthetic formats can be successfully applied to education, leadership, social skills and many other walks of life.

WABI

According to tradition, most aesthetic concepts are best introduced indirectly, through art, so they can be felt and experienced rather than understood. Two poems by Fujiwara Teika (1162-1241) are often used to describe wabi. One pictures a thatched-roofed hut on a seashore at dusk in autumn. The other describes the very first green shoots in spring peeping through the snow. Though the two images are completely different, they both invoke strong feelings of naturalness, the natural state of things. While there are many ways to age objects there is no way to make them look or be wabi, they simply have to be it.

Takeno Joo (1502-1555) established wabi as the term identifying as the essential spirit of Chanoyu ("The Way of Tea"), he also made Tea the medium of development of one of the aesthetic and intellectual ideals in Japanese culture. Instead or actually along with highly prized mostly Chinese utensils, ideals of wabi inspired simple, accessible natural utensils such as a wooden well bucket, green bamboo lid rest or unglazed pottery. Simple, austere type of beauty along with serene transcendental state of mind are at the foundation of what was later named wabicha or wabi style of Chanoyu started by Joo, continued by Sen Rikyū (1522-1591) and perfected by his grandson, Sen Sōtan (1578-1658).

Wabi as a method is supposed to inspire creativity and the development of the new ideas and ways. While the manner in the tearoom and the procedure for making tea is supposed to be traditional, creative thought and effort to bring immediacy and freshness to each gathering is what spirit of wabi brings. Denis Hirota writes: "This creative vision was, I think, associated in Joo's mind with the humility and sincere aspiration of the beginner and the amateur." (Hirota, 1980)

In the "The Broom Tree" record the accomplished amateur is termed "wabi sukisha" – "One devoted to tea in the spirit of wabi." (Hirota, 1980). While this person could not acquire Chinese utensils and could not become a connoisseur in the traditional sense, but instead is characterised as possessing "creativity" and would by necessity be inclined to develop new utensils. Earnestness and freedom from pretense are expressed in the letter on wabi as shojiki "open and straightforward" – the attitude considered to be crucial for the beginner in any discipline. It stands in particular against the mere mimicking the accomplished style of a master.

Many masters warn against imitating wabi. Unlike sabi, which is characterized by patina, and can be reproduced, wabi is an inherent quality and cannot be applied or cultivated.

Takeno Joo comments on cultivating “illuminating discernment” by unassuming appreciation of things. To Joo, the term “illuminating discernment” means the power to see and judge not only utensils but all things and encounters.

KINTSUGI

Kintsugi is a method of highlighting repairs of the utensils in gold rather than hiding them by only using invisible materials. Such repairs are made either in gold, silver (they will tarnish in time changing both colour and visual impact) or red or brown or black. Kintsugi is not an aesthetic concept and is widely misunderstood (just like wabi is) in the West today. So much so that there actually are kits of broken bowls and repair materials sold on the internet. In no way is the repair itself the goal of the process. It is the notion of appreciation of things as they are (just like wabi) despite their imperfection. While the whole idea of perfection and its view in Japanese aesthetics is a conversation for a different paper, I am using the term to identify the original form. Once the bowl is broken, it will always be a broken bowl. However, it doesn't downgrade its other qualities in the view of the Japanese. In Chanoyu repaired utensils are mostly used in the month of October, the month to which the ideas of wabi are very closely connected. The description of a hut with the thatched roof on a seashore at dusk in autumn invokes the feeling of nostalgia and sadness, both so often reflected in Japanese poetry. This is the time in tea when mismatched sets and repaired dishes and bowls are supposed to be used. Not only one accepts things as they are, but also, we reuse (rather than recycle) multiuse objects because they are beautiful despite being repaired and because they possibly hold and share stories.

Expanding Aesthetic Impact

The traditional function of aesthetics in the West is to produce visual, aural, emotional impact and move the audience of spectators. While it is also true when we speak about Japanese aesthetics, there are additional areas where the latter expands the aesthetic experience. There are simply more categories in which beauty is manifested. Both wabi and kintsugi are good examples of that. In addition, aesthetics in Japan play an important role in politics, education, ethics, environment, maintaining of national identity, and many other areas.

Contemplative arts in Japan do not just exist in a well-protected environment far away from real life. They survive and flourish right in the middle of busy city life, in factories and companies. Employers use them as well-tested tools to provide an oasis of peace and quiet for their workers and to develop the workers' appreciation of arts in general. Chanoyu, Ikebana and other arts are taught in automobile companies and other industries, both because they provide a much-needed escape from the business of every day life but also because these “Ways” provide the perfect environment for the cultivation of the better workers and citizens. An everyday aesthetics where it seems that every object and act are based on both beauty and reason is most extraordinary. Where else would you see flower arrangements at a busy metro station?

The influence of Japanese aesthetics has reached far beyond Japan. Arguably, it is one of the most influential canons of beauty in world culture today. It has had and continues to have significant influence on world architecture, painting, design, culinary arts, garden and flower arts, fashion and so on.

At the same time, aesthetics is also applicable to issues of environment, socialization, team building, leadership, and education just to name a few. I think it would be particularly interesting to apply Japanese aesthetics to the many walks of life outside Japan. Mara Miller writes: “The value of Japanese aesthetics lies less in the knowledge they give us about the Japanese... than the truths they expose about the human condition...” (Miller, 2011)

Conclusions

Japanese aesthetics opens a gate to a rich, complex, and fascinating world of a different kind of beauty. Exploring that world provides not only aesthetic pleasure but also offers a comprehensive and multifaceted perspective with multiple possible applications. Aesthetics-based contemplative practices can significantly improve one’s productivity, mental health, and overall quality of life. While contemplative practices are directed inward, they also inspire curiosity and expand inter-cultural understanding. They help to develop a more compassionate view of the behaviour and values of others, especially of those who are unlike us. They facilitate acceptance of and compassion towards the other. In turn awareness of the other and of the world also cultivates insight and inward exploration.

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