

DONALD KEENE
THE
PLEASURES
OF
JAPANESE
LITERATURE



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TO
SHIRLEY HAZZARD
AND
FRANCIS STEEGMULLER

P R E F A C E ■

THIS BOOK originated as five lectures, three delivered at the New York Public Library in the spring of 1986, the fourth at the University of California at Los Angeles in 1986, and the last at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1987. Although I had at first intended to discuss all periods of Japanese literature and theater, I discovered that I really wanted to talk about traditional, rather than modern developments. The present book, which grew out of the lectures, is therefore concerned with the Japanese poetry, prose, and drama of the premodern eras, and only passing references are made to the achievements of recent times.

The lectures—and this book—were intended for a general audience, and certain information well known to every scholar of Japan was included for this reason. I have added a list of suggested readings for persons who wish to go beyond this introduction to more detailed studies and to the works that have been translated into English.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATIONS ■

THE FIRST of the four illustrations that follow shows the poet Ono no Komachi as depicted in the scroll *Nyōbō Sanjūrokunin Uta-awase* (Thirty-six Women Poets, Their Poems Compared) by the eighteenth-century painter Minamoto no Nobuyoshi. The text is typical of the melancholy passion of her poems: "I realize now that the thing that fades, its color invisible, is the flower in the heart of one who lives in this world."

The second is an illustration by the seventeenth-century artist Tawaraya Sōtatsu for a section of *Tales of Ise*. It portrays Narihira journeying to the east, disappointed by life at the court. On the way he meets an acquaintance who is returning to the capital, and he gives the man a message for a woman he has left behind: "Here by Mount Utsu in Suruga, I do not meet you, alas, neither in reality or even in dreams."

The third is an illustration by the seventeenth-century painter Chōjirō of a scene from the *Tamakazura* (The Jew-

eled Chaplet) chapter of *The Tale of Genji*. It shows Genji offering presents of New Year's robes to the various ladies who live in his palace.

The last is a sketch by Kawanabe Gyōsai (1831–1889) of a scene from the Kabuki play *Meiboku Sendai Hagi*, first performed in 1777. The complicated plot includes a scene in which a huge rat, cornered by men loyal to the rightful heir to the domain, reveals his true appearance, a man in gray carrying the same scroll that the rat had in its mouth. Members of the audience are visible on the other side of the trapdoor through which the rat disappears.

■ CREDITS

The *Nyōbō Sanjūrokunin Uta-awase* illustration by Minamoto no Nobuyoshi (mid-eighteenth century, Edo period; handscroll, ink, gold, and color on paper) appears courtesy of the Spencer Collection, The New York Public Library; Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

The Tawaraya Sōtatsu illustration of the Mount Utsu episode from the *Tales of Ise* (seventeenth century, Edo period; hanging scroll, color and gold on paper) and the Chōjiro illustration of the Jeweled Chaplet chapter of *The Tale of Genji* (end of sixteenth–early seventeenth century: hanging scroll, color on paper) appear courtesy of the Mary and Jackson Burke Collection New York, New York; photos by Otto E. Nelson.

The sketch by Kawanabe Gyōsai of a scene from the Kabuki play *Meiboku Sendai Hagi* (Meiji period; 75.29-12 Japanese Drawing; 25.3 x 36.5 cm) appears courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C.

女房三十八人歌

凡

小野小町

色みくろの路

常の心

花あけ









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ONE ■

JAPANESE AESTHETICS

IT WOULD BE difficult to describe adequately in the course of a few pages the full range of Japanese aesthetics or even to suggest the main features of Japanese taste as it has evolved over the centuries. It probably would be even more difficult to discuss any aspect of Japanese culture without alluding to the Japanese sense of beauty, perhaps the central element in all of Japanese culture. I will attempt to describe some of the characteristics of Japanese taste in terms of one book, *Tsurezuregusa* (Essays in Idleness), a collection of short essays by the priest Kenkō, written mainly between 1330 and 1333. This work does not explain the whole of Japanese aesthetics, obviously not the developments of the last six hundred years, but I believe that it contains much that illuminates Japanese preferences today, despite the long interval of time since it was written and despite the immense changes that Japanese civilization has undergone, especially during the past century.

The author is generally known by his name as a Buddhist

priest, Kenkō. His name when he was born in 1283 was Urabe no Kaneyoshi, and he came from a family of hereditary Shintō priests. It is somewhat surprising that a man of a Shintō background should have become a Buddhist, but the two religions of Japan, though antithetical in many respects, were both accepted by the Japanese; in general, the Japanese in the past (and the present) have turned to Shintō for help in this life, and to Buddhism for salvation in the world to come.

Kenkō, though his rank as a Shintō priest was modest, seems to have won a secure place in court circles thanks to his skill at composing poetry. This alone should suggest how highly poetic skill was valued by the court, which in most respects was acutely conscious of rank and ancestry. For courtiers, an ability to compose poetry was an indispensable accomplishment, and Kenkō may have been welcomed to the palace less as a poet than as a tutor in poetry to those who lacked outstanding poetic talent.

Kenkō took Buddhist orders in 1324 at the age of 41, after the death of the Emperor Go-Uda, whom he had served. Many reasons have been adduced for his decision to "leave the world," but nothing in his writings suggests that it was an act of despair. Buddhist thought figures prominently in *Essays in Idleness*, and it can hardly be doubted that Kenkō was sincere when he urged readers to "flee from the Burning House" of this world and find refuge in religion. But he did not in the least resemble the typical Buddhist monks of the medieval period, who either lived in monasteries or else were hermits. Kenkō lived in the city and was as familiar with worldly gossip as with Buddhist doctrine. Certain Buddhist beliefs, notably the impermanence of all things, run through his work, but even though he insisted that the possessions that people accumulate in this world do not last,

he did not condemn them as hateful dross, as a more orthodox Buddhist priest might have. Obviously, he did not reject the world. Ultimately this world was not enough, but Kenkō seems always to be saying that while we are here we should try to enrich our lives with beauty.

Essays in Idleness consists of 243 sections. They are not systematically presented; it was in the nature of a work in the *zuihitsu* tradition of "following the brush," to allow one's writing brush to skip from one topic to another in whichever direction it was led by free association. Kenkō did not enunciate a consistent philosophy—it is easy to find contradictions among the various sections, and some are so trivial in content that we may wonder why he included them. But a concern with beauty is never far from his thoughts, and this aspect of the work, much more than its Buddhist message, has influenced Japanese taste. *Essays in Idleness* was unknown to the reading public during Kenkō's lifetime, but it came into prominence at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and since then has been one of the best known of the Japanese classics. Kenkō's tastes at once reflected those of Japanese of much earlier times, and greatly contributed to the formation of the aesthetic preferences of Japanese for centuries to come.

A typical section of *Essays in Idleness* will illustrate Kenkō's manner. It is section 81.

A screen or sliding door decorated with a painting or inscription in clumsy brushwork gives an impression less of its own ugliness than of the bad taste of the owner. It is all too apt to happen that a man's possessions betray his inferiority. I am not suggesting that a man should own nothing but masterpieces. I refer to the practice of deliberately decorating in a tasteless and ugly manner 'to keep