PENNY SPARKE

JAPANESE DESIGN

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• MICHAEL JOSEPH •

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Opposite: Ghost chair, designed by Keijiro Odera, 1986.

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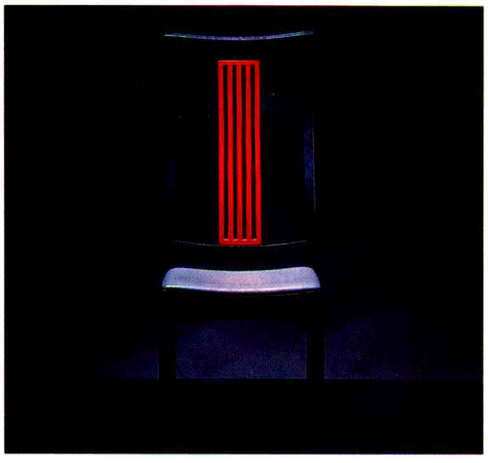

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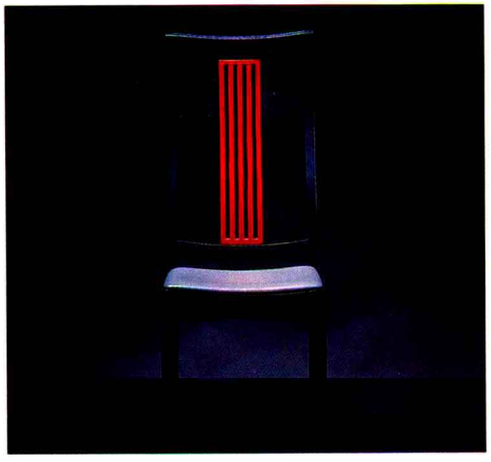
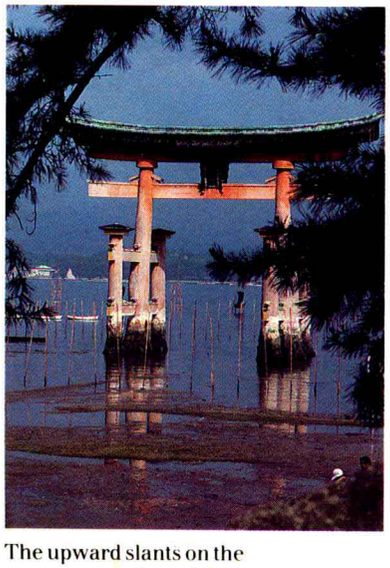


Introduction

'Our aesthetic sense is our order'[1]

For many people, the term 'Japanese design' evokes the high level of aesthetic achievement of the country's traditional applied arts, from ceramics to lacquerwork to architecture. For others, it is associated with the strong visual appeal of the consumer gadgets that pour out of Japan's new, post-war production centres. These two parallel, and seemingly divergent, aspects make the concept of Japanese design difficult to define.

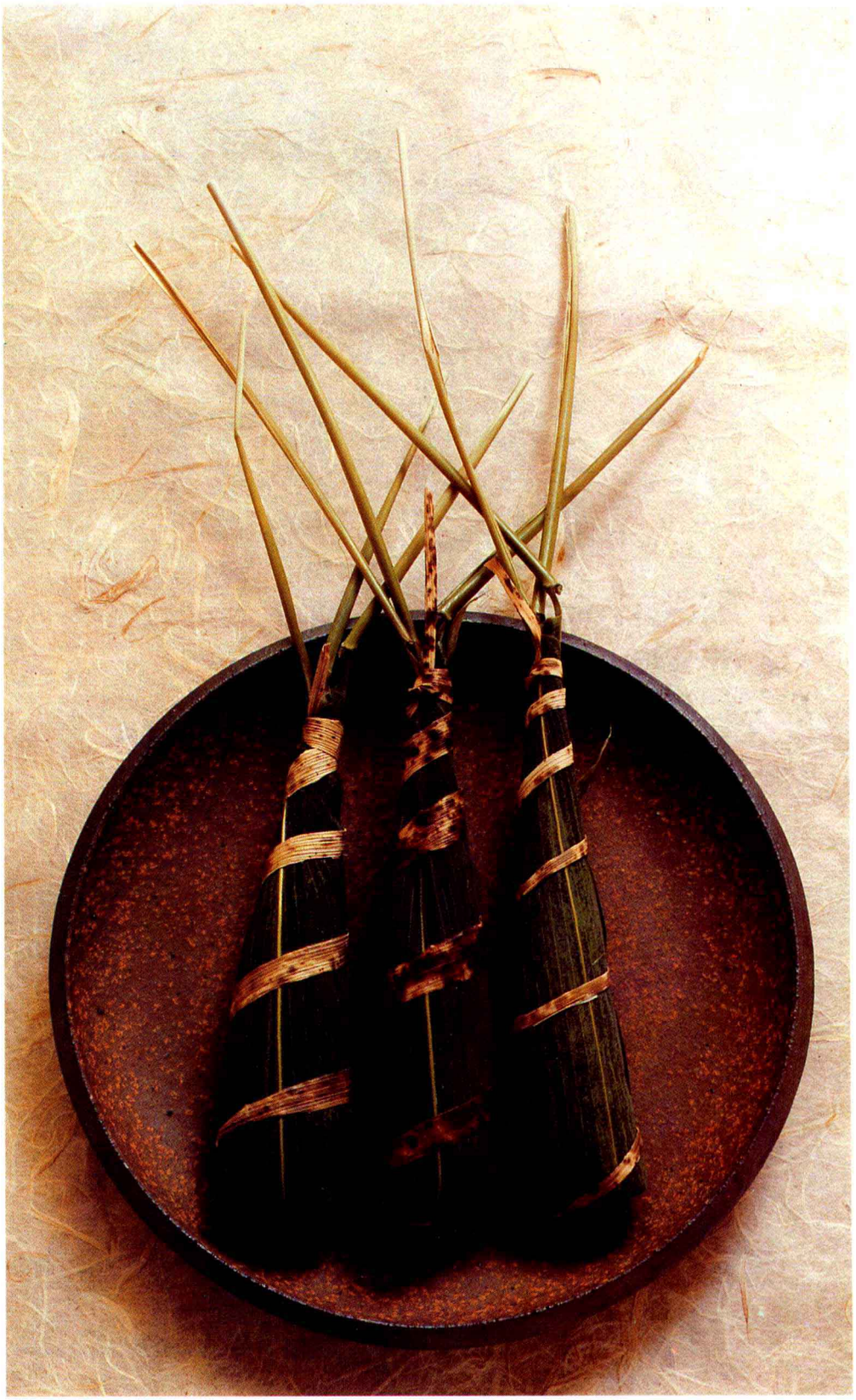
The inherent problem in trying to discuss these two aspects of Japanese design in a single breath is that they function within different cultural and historical contexts and on different cultural levels. The former depends on the continued close link, within traditional Japanese culture, between aesthetics, religious belief and everyday life. The latter is a spin-off from Japan's highly successful efforts to mass-produce, with imported technology, a wide range of technically innovative goods – cameras, audio and video equipment, domestic appliances, motorcycles and cars – which will compete in world markets on the bases of low cost and high technical efficiency. The appearance of these products, while undoubtedly fascinating and novel to many foreign customers, was, in the early post-war years at least, less a result of a specific visual policy on the part of the manufacturers than of technological and economic expediency combined with an eye to the preferences of foreign markets.



The upward slants on the curves on roofs, such as on the 'torii' gate at the Itsukushima shrine at Miyajima, are one of the features of traditional Japanese aesthetics which have influenced contemporary Japanese design – from architecture to automobiles.

Although at first sight there is no common ground between these two views of Japanese design, they can be discussed together. This is because, in spite of so much Western influence and hybridization within Japanese culture in this century, many traditional Japanese aesthetic concepts have carried through into the present, providing a link with the past and a strong sense of cultural continuity. As J. V. Earle has written, 'Modern Japan is a unique example of the way in which a sophisticated urban culture has adopted Western methods to take on and outstrip the West in terms of trade, industry and the like and yet, to a remarkable degree, has retained its distinctive character.'[2]

While this continuity is very easily observed within contemporary Japanese everyday life – in, for instance, the way traditional food is presented and small parcels are wrapped – and within those contemporary Japanese design areas in which the individual plays a strong part – architecture, fashion, graphics and craft, for example – it is less easily discerned in high-technology products. In mass-production industries, the designer is an anonymous team member within a large corporation, and design is part of a very complex formula which includes marketing and sales. Even there, however, the persistence and ubiquity of cultural values have meant that many traditional Japanese aesthetic concerns *have*



An immaculate way of wrapping items has, for centuries, represented one of Japan's aesthetic strengths. These 'chimaki', or rice dumplings wrapped in bamboo leaves, demonstrate how attention to packaging detail extends to the preparation of food.

Left: This suit of Japanese armour from the nineteenth century, based on a fourteenth-century model, shows clearly how one aspect of traditional Japanese visual culture favours complexity and attention to minute detail.

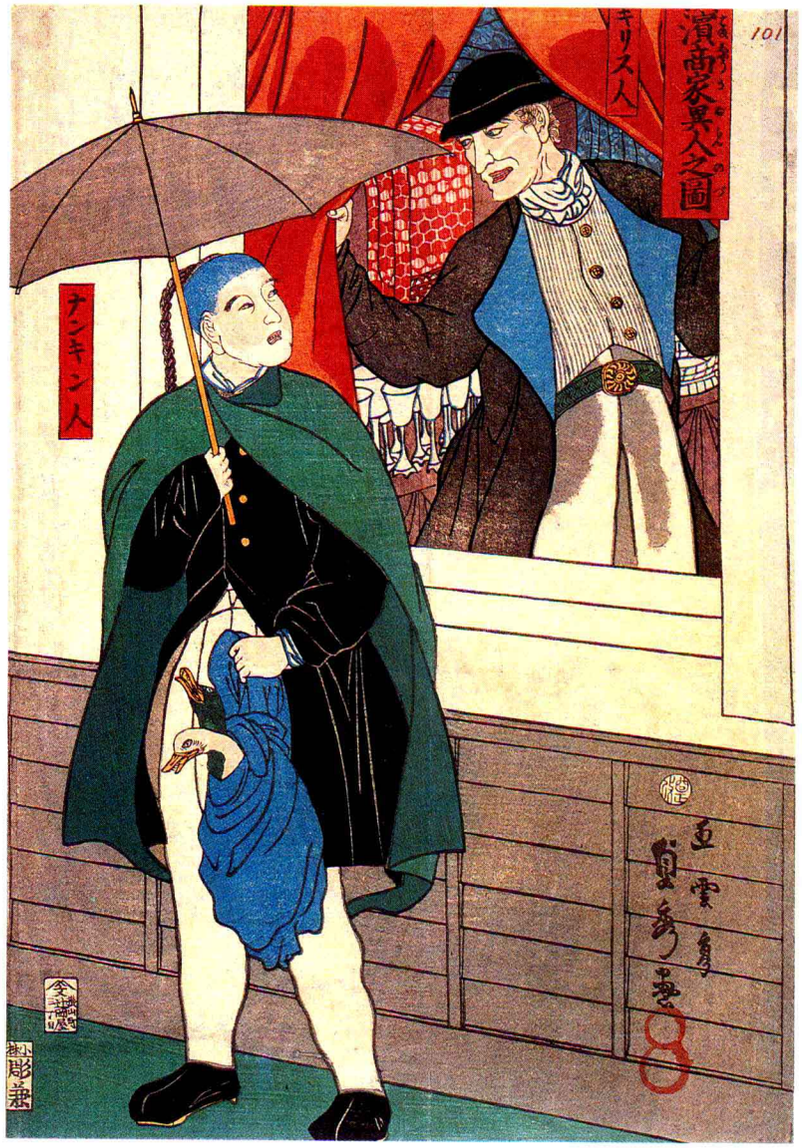
In contrast to the visual detail on the suit of armour, the aesthetic impact of the stepping stones in the garden of the Knochiin Nanzenji Temple in Kyoto derives from their stark simplicity and closeness to nature.

survived and flourished – among them, miniaturization and portability, multi-functionality, attention to minute detail rather than to overall form, and the decorative use of functional components. In addition, a few high-technology companies, such as Honda, Yamaha and Sony, have made deliberate attempts to define design policies which take into account many well-established aesthetic concepts. It is clearly more difficult to sustain traditional values in areas which depend upon imported technology and the use of new, unfamiliar materials. None the less, there are increasing signs that Japanese industry is anxious to do so. This account of Japanese design, while trying to avoid a preoccupation with issues of 'good' and 'bad', will therefore focus on the conscious efforts that have been made since the Second World War to evolve a national design movement which takes into account Japan's past achievements, and which, in turn, forms the basis of a growing international design movement.

Ironically, many of its characteristics have not been taken directly from an appreciation of traditional aesthetics, but at second hand through the intervention of the European and American Modern Movement. What may seem like the influence of Western culture on Japan from the 1930s onwards is really just another means of Japan's realigning itself with its own traditional culture in an international context. For the Modern Movement depends considerably upon essentially Japanese principles, although this has been largely overlooked, and one of the aims of this book is to redress that imbalance and to suggest how central Japan's influence was to the aesthetic assumptions that underpinned the international architecture and design movement. As Robin Boyd has explained, 'Many qualities in the Japanese tradition match emotionally the most advanced mood of international architecture. These include the love of naked materials, the delight in open space at the expense of partitions and furnishing impedimenta, the pleasure of demonstrating the structural means of support and the satisfaction in the use of a module.'[3] Japan's obsession, through the 1950s, with the Western Modern Movement of the pre-war years was, in fact, not just in answer to the need to address an international market, but also a means of its looking at its own traditions at one remove and thereby coming to terms with them once again.

To say that contemporary Japanese design still depends upon traditional aesthetics is not, however, to imply that there is only one 'style' visible today. For several centuries, Japan has been able to accommodate two highly contrasting styles, the one, in the words of J. V. Earle, 'colourful, decorative, exuberant and inventive'[4] and the other 'monochrome, linear, refined and austere'.[5] Japan is a country of constant dualisms, of, for example, the co-existence of Western and Eastern ideas, and of decoration and austerity. As Masaru Katsumie explains, 'They turn eclecticism to their advantage and use it as a means of adding variety and enjoyment to their lives.'[6]

The main reasons for the existence of this overt eclecticism within Japanese culture can be found in the way it accumulates and retains



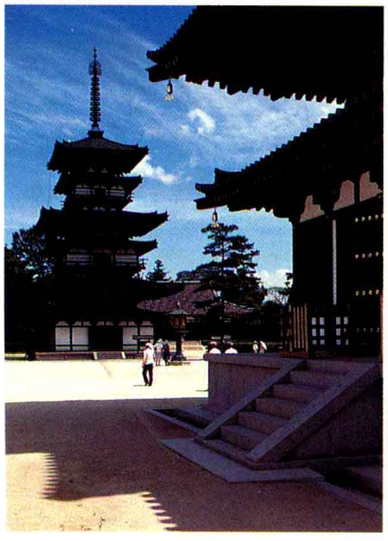
In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Japan the wood-block or 'ukiyo-e' print was a cheap form of expendable mass culture, much-loved by the members of the new merchant class. This colourful example, by Sadahide, is entitled 'Foreigners in Yokohama'.

cultural values rather than letting one replace another. For example, when Buddhism was introduced into Japan, it left room for Shintoism, and today there is as much evidence of the presence of, say, sixteenth-century Buddhist culture in Japan as there is of eighteenth-century Japanese merchant culture or twentieth-century European culture. Having always taken from abroad, Japan is used to absorbing foreign influences and making them its own: there is a time and a place within Japanese culture for each one. The fundamental Japanese belief in the changes brought about by the cycle of the seasons encourages its highly flexible attitude towards cultural variance.

As there is so much of Japan's cultural past in its cultural present it is important to understand where some of the basic aesthetic tenets originate. The most important reason, however, why these aesthetic traditions are still

relevant to contemporary culture is the fact that they have always been based on 'popular' rather than 'aristocratic' values. As such, they have influenced the life-styles of the vast majority of the Japanese population, so that it is possible to talk realistically about 'shared values' and 'known rules' in a way that is difficult to do in the West where aesthetic codes have not moved freely through class barriers. The highly controlled and homogeneous nature of Japanese society, and the traditional emphasis upon the social group, rather than upon the individual, have enhanced this respect for rules and allowed them to flourish as a means of reinforcing group activity and stability.

The strongest influence upon Japan's traditional aesthetic values has been that of Buddhism. Introduced from China in the sixth century, Buddhism joined Shintoism to become one of the two most influential religions in Japan. Buddhism brought with it a more philosophical approach to life than Shintoism, and a strong link between aesthetics and morality underpinned the Buddhist creed. Buddhist monks organized their lives in their monasteries on the idea of the 'economy of means'. According to Buddhist belief, poverty, austerity and simplicity were a means to contemplation and spirituality. These ideals provided the philosophical framework for the famous Japanese ritual tea-ceremony, or 'Cha-No-Yu'. It established a number of important aesthetic rules which are still the basis of the Japanese life-style and which, according to A. L. Sadler and C. E. Tuttle, 'have kept the national taste more sensitive and healthy and potent than that of perhaps any other country'.[7]



The East Pagoda of the Yakushiji Temple in Nara, one of the oldest Buddhist temples in Japan. Buddhist culture was introduced into Japan in the sixth and seventh centuries during the Nara period, joining Shintoism as one of the country's dominant religions.

Originally imported from China, tea-drinking was turned into a specifically Japanese ceremony at around the end of the fourteenth century by Murata Shuko who advocated its introduction into private homes as well as in the special tea-rooms within monasteries. 'Teism', as it became called, was transformed, however, in the sixteenth century by Sen Rikyu, the greatest tea-master of all, into the ritual that it remains today.

There are several important aspects of the tea-ceremony which concern the establishment of an aesthetic code of behaviour. They include the use of only a precise number of utensils needed for the task – among them a 'furo' or furnace, a 'gotoku' or trivet, a ladle and charcoal tongs, a slop bowl, a 'mizu-sashi' or water-vessel, a kettle and kettle-stand, tea-caddies, and ceramic tea-bowls. A lack of decoration or ostentation in these utensils, a standardized, ritualized behaviour involved in preparing and taking tea, and the ultimate emphasis on the spiritual aspect of the action rather than the material end are also vital elements of the ritual.

A number of Japanese terms evolved in connection with the tea-ceremony which were used to describe the aesthetic elements within it: 'wabi', for example. This is a general concept which has been translated in a number of different and rather confusing ways. It is used, in the general sense, to mean 'a way of life synonymous with poverty and limitation'[8] and implies the 'attainment of spirituality without material possession'.[9] It

The concept of 'shibui' or 'astringency in taste' is well exemplified in the simple, rustic aesthetic of these ceramic cups used in the tea-ceremony. The irregular decoration on their surfaces and their 'unfinished' forms seem to have occurred almost by chance.

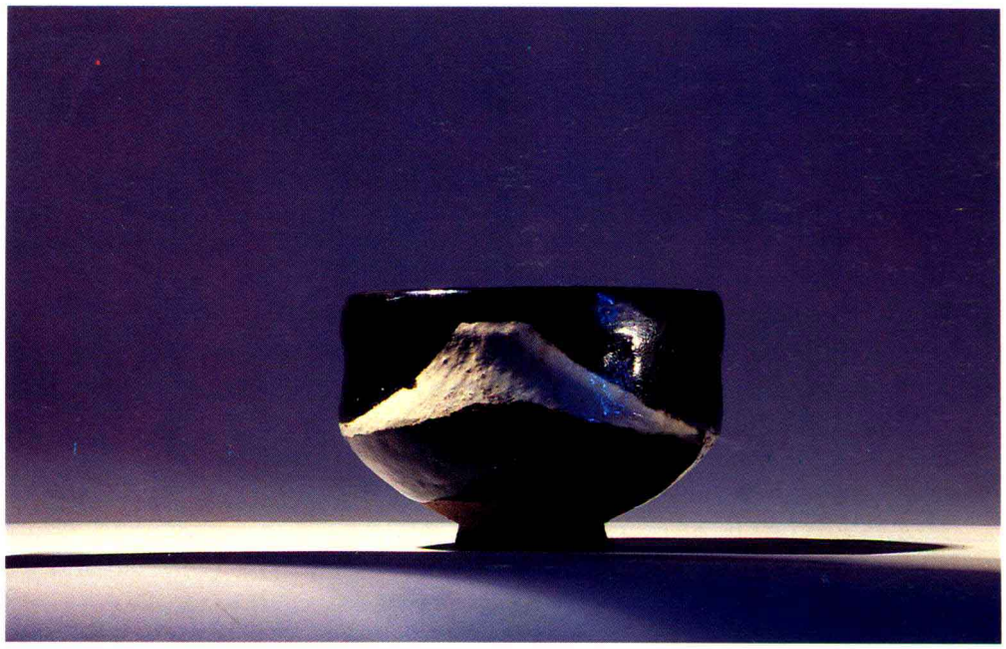
further suggests the idea of 'imperfection' or 'irregularity' which comes from living one's life in direct contact with the rawness of nature. As an aesthetic concept the notion of 'rusticity' has remained fundamental to much of the work produced by Japanese craftsmen, particularly potters, over the years.

An accompanying, and more specifically aesthetic concept to 'wabi' is that of 'sabi' which has been at the centre of a great deal of discussion about Japanese art and design over the centuries, particularly in relation to the European Modern Movement. It refers, specifically, to the timelessness, simplicity, and purity of Japanese objects, but also to the idea that if an object functions well then it must look good. The aesthetic of economy that emerges from these concepts is at the heart of the Japanese approach to

everyday life, not just of the tea-ceremony, and permeates numerous areas of contemporary Japanese design.

'Shibui', which emerges constantly in this context, derives from the specifically Zen-Buddhist concept of expressing spirituality through minimal aesthetic means. A good example is the highly rigorous Zen approach to garden design where two stones placed strategically can stand for the whole universe. 'Shibui', meaning literally 'astringency in taste',

The 'Cha-No-Yu', or tea-ceremony, has been practised in Japan in its present form for about four hundred years. Both a social and spiritual ritual, it is highly stylized and depends upon minimal surroundings and the use of the correct set of utensils.



This eighteenth-century cup, with an image of Mount Fuji on its side, is used in the tea-ceremony.