

JAPAN THE BEAUTY OF FOOD



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The small Zen monastery on the shores of a Japanese lake where I once lived had a charming dry garden. Every morning it was swept clean of fallen leaves and put in order. This took place in a casual manner with the speed common for all work—verging on haste, and yet unhurried. More an economical nature, the most fluid form of perpetual movement. Sometimes I would seat myself on the periphery of this small, sandy landscape and allow it to influence me. But I never saw any of the gardeners do so. For the monks, it seemed as if the meditational potential of the garden was exhausted once the work was completed. Beyond this work, the garden no longer existed as a *special* object of contemplation—and even less, of course, one of aesthetic awareness. This was reserved for visitors, for tourists.

A similar sobriety was evident when the gardeners came to trim the trees, for at least a week, at my hostess's house in Kyoto. For days on end, they stood on their ladders working on the pine tree's branches, trimming and pruning with what looked like nail scissors. They never needed to take a step back from the object of their efforts, as would an artist to witness the progress of his painting. When their work was finished and the tree looked like "the picture of a pine," it was not because it had been treated as such.

Not a superfluous preamble to a comparison of two different cultures and their respective aesthetics. The delight that the severity, charm, simplicity and delicacy of Japanese objects and procedures calls forth among Western observers has its roots

in a different sensibility and a different self-image. If it invites one, as do the food still lifes Reinhard Wolf has photographed, to contemplate things in isolation, one should never forget that each Japanese work of art is never the product of any isolated activity. The aesthetic correctness that appeals to us through a simple meal or loving packaging is not to be confused with a Western discourse on "what is beautiful." The cook who cuts up a radish with horrendous but imperturbable speed, combines strips of raw fish with some herb or creates a magical arrangement of blossoms "knows not what he is doing." Anyone who assumes—and justly so—that a maximum of spiritual discipline is the basis for the work of a master artist or potter will hear the craftsmen talking in everyday terms about the qualities of his materials and

the years of experience needed to get to know them. This is not a case of understatement. An expert in his trade has nothing to hide. His secrets are evident to all. Anyone who cannot recognize them on the surface or hold them in his hands will not see them any more clearly through an in-depth analysis. Anyone who has seen a master flower arranger handling flowers knows that there is nothing hesitant or delicate about his art. This takes us nearer to the surprisingly simple solution to a complex phenomenon.

The proximity to nature of Japanese art has often been praised. But this praise is appropriate only when we have learned to free our understanding of nature from mutually opposing concepts that spring up like a reflex in our Western minds, such as nature and civilization or nature and art. Civilization in Japan has never developed contrary to, or far away from, nature. There is no Japanese Rousseau. So there is no sentimentality towards nature. Even the topography of opposites is wrong. The antithesis propounded by Schiller between "naïve" and "sentimental" art is

not found in Japan. There is just as little need for a transfiguration of (lost) nature through art as there is for art to assert itself as "pure" or "beautiful." If we concur with Schiller, Western art is covered by an elegiac veil or an idyllic yearning, the hard shadow of satire or the proud, hard shine of autonomy. In Japan there are no cultural roots for art's suffering from itself, from its smallness or greatness. But there is no suspicion of escapism, either. Although civilization has taken hold of real life in Japan much more ruthlessly than elsewhere, the "beautiful things" of life, which find room to exist in the sparse spaces in between, do not have the stop-gap character of garden gnomes. Moreover, "great" art has just as little need to overstretch itself with a semi-theological claim to represent something "completely different."

To us a Japanese work of art—for example, some food arranged on a plate—may well seem individual. But to Japanese eyes its peculiarity resembles that of one blossom on a large tree. For the Japanese, the thought that the growth of a

cherry tree is indeed related to that of an automobile company or Gross National Product is less strange than it is to us. In a country such as Japan, where corporate and social elements are passed on in such an elementary manner, one learns to consider "processed nature" in a factory as something just as "organic" as the "functioning nature" of a plant. Both are just various aspects of an ordered continuum. One can even recognize the animism of faceless Japan in this. It avails itself quite uninhibitedly of the fetishes of our industrial age, such as when lost needles, worn-out hats or used batteries enjoy "religious" reverence in a temple. Religion in Japan, just like art or nature, is much less than in the West a fission product of our cultural development and much more a "creature of habit" of a scarcely reflected way of life. Thus, despite a rigid division of labor, Japanese society has maintained everywhere surprising, carefree points of access to that nonspecial phenomenon which impresses us as "art." However, sound taste does not always guard over these access points. What we refer to as "art" does not, in Japan, prove its worth in

all matters and materials of modern life. We need a selective eye and a limited viewpoint to distinguish "original" from "hideous" Japan.

The discovery of Japan as an aesthetic province, a *musée imaginaire* of subtlety—this, too, is based on a Japan observed from outside. It is just as much the work of foreigners as was the "discovery" of the Alps (not their natural but their cultural magnitude) by urban Englishmen. But such transferences also change the reality of life for those living in the country. The fact that the popular functional art of colored woodcutting was something special and highly valued became clear to the Japanese through its admiring imitators, van Gogh, Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec. The services rendered by Fenollosa, an American, in "establishing" the Noh drama form in reformed Japan have been historically recognized. When Bruno Taut celebrated the Katsura Villa as a jewel of perfect functionality, the creed of New Objectivity altered the aura of this traditional architectural monument, even in Japanese eyes. Moreover, the abbot of a monastery in Kyoto,

from whom I once heard the sentence "True Zen is only found outside Japan nowadays . . .," was not merely appealing to my sense of irony.

A Japanese craftsman working on his product in a practical and nondistanced manner cannot assess its value in the same way as an observer from abroad. Nevertheless, the latter passes on a need to the creator and thus allows a new market to emerge. Modern Japan has largely adapted the aesthetic, Western appreciation of its art, even its everyday art. Japanese designers in Paris are said to be "japanizing" fashion. Japan's new popular art, photography, also shows Japanese objects in splendid isolation, cut off from their cultural background, as products separated from their production process. It is not just for the tourist industry that Japan presents itself as the backdrop for Japanese specialties, a refined self-quotation. Just as naturally as all this, products made by craftsmen have taken on the character of luxuries in advanced industrialized societies. Making such products is not only a precious but also an expensive business.

Therefore one can see an inborn contradiction in the "reproduction original." Of course, any beautiful handmade product is an anachronism in our mass-production society. But still, such expressions of noncontemporaneity are less awkward in Japan than elsewhere. This "naturalness" is not merely a semblance; it reflects, as it were, a special Japanese trait. It is a well-known fact that major industrial concerns in Japan work on pre-industrial, quasi-feudal, "family" lines. In this noncontemporary state, however, they satisfy not only the demands of economic efficiency but also the need for in-company communication as well as for the material and emotional security of the employees. Put another way, Japan's development towards a service economy is also fostering old-fashioned "nice" forms of courtesy. Exquisite packaging is found not only in the department store but also in the haulage contractor's warehouse. The various levels of production enter into surprising, "anachronistic" relationships that one immediately regards as "Japanese." Thus, the exorbitant price of land necessitates an economical way of living that—from a

domestic consumption viewpoint—may be regarded as old-fashioned. However, at their best, the furnishings do appear “beautiful” and the simplicity of tradition is maintained (often involuntarily). State-of-the-art electronic products or sophisticated automobiles arrive in a rural community without simply reducing it to the level of scenery.

In a temple run on modern business principles, a company will send its managerial staff for a meditation weekend. Outside, women gardeners will be sweeping up the leaves in their timeless traditional costumes. But there is no artificial, just-wearing-a-traditional-costume air about it. “In a wrong life there cannot be a right one” is a saying that did not originate in Japan. A futuristic object or avant-garde way of living is not always present in a tasteful manner but always does exist quite unceremoniously in a pre-industrial setting and makes use of the latter’s reassuring powers. The salaried employee who changes from his work clothes to those of his forefathers and sits down on a rice-straw mat at home has not experienced a

leap in time in his own consciousness. The integrative strength of Japanese civilization has remained unbroken and robust in the face of progress, real or alleged. This becomes particularly evident in the “subtlety” of statements made by the Japanese. Despite an extensive and currently very popular debate on what “Japanese identity” is, this debate strikes the non-Japanese—at least by its non-questioning element—as far as the experience of everyday life goes. In every respect, it is evident that Japanese self-esteem did not have to be acquired in a struggle *against* Western influences, but reached its climax in a voluntary and selective assimilation of the latter.

The art of producing something tricky and difficult as perfectly as possible *by hand* is practiced by every Japanese child when learning to write. This practice would seem to provide an inexhaustible store for that feeling for form whose products we find “aesthetic.” The fact that, of all things, the electronic revolution and its reproductive speed have finally freed Japanese characters from the impermanent demand that they should

be “rationalized”—i.e., simplified—is certainly not one of the minor paradoxes of Japanese civilization.

Thus, the eye of the Western photographer who presents food—or rather, exquisite pictures of edible compositions of which a good many are everyday phenomena—in an isolated fashion offering visual pleasure to the eye of the beholder finds his work in no way inconsistent with modern Japanese society.

After all, a traditional custom still holds true today. At every Japanese table the kneeling guest will concentrate his gaze on the dishes before tasting them—very audibly, if they are an honor to the host. Japan’s culture of eating is concerned with kindling all the senses. The tongue replies to the eye just as one taste does to another. The visible picture itself is part and parcel of a synthesis of pleasure-bringing arts. Referring to a nice meal (itself an almost inappropriate term) as a poem would be understood less metaphorically in Japan than elsewhere in the world. Then one would need to have fewer inhibitions outside Japan in calling a poem “food.”