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Beauty Through Japanese Eyes

The Tale of Genji as a Window to Japan—Part 2

The *Tale of Genji*, one of the most famous books in Japan and even the world, led us in the 2011 Winter Issue of *Japan Harvest* to think about beauty in Japanese culture. Even though the world of Genji existed over 1,000 years ago, the vivid imagery and concepts seem just as fresh and contemporary today as they did to the first readers. The beauty in this masterpiece both gives us a starting point to investigate other Japanese art and culture in the present day, and more importantly, can lead our own hearts to worship God through Japanese eyes.

BEAUTY IN SUBTLETY

Japanese can say so much with so little. One chapter of *The Tale of Genji* consists of just the title, “Vanished into the Clouds,” and an empty page. The hero of the story, the Shining Prince Genji, has died. His life, like all human life, is as transient as the clouds. Words cannot express the pain and loss of death.

Japanese are masters at saying things without actually saying things. Kyorai Mukai, disciple of the internationally renowned poet Matsuo Basho, masters this in the following haiku:

花守や
白き頭を
つきあはせ

*Two blossom watchmen
With their white heads together
Having a chat*

Meaning, color, and images are all inferred through the skillful weaving of words. Two old men with “white heads” are watching the cherry blossoms. Though not mentioned, pink cherry blossoms and brightly colored clothing can easily be imagined. The pathos of the scene makes you realize the blossoms will soon die and be no more, one day followed by the white heads.

Subtlety increases beauty to the Japanese sense. Genji translator Arthur Waley writes, “A phrase, a clouded hint, an allusion half-expressed, a gesture imperceptible to common eyes...” (from his introduction to *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagan*)

are the height of beauty in *Heian* culture during the eleventh century.

But has not the art of this language continued until the present day? The confused foreigner is often left to guess the end of sentences: 「それはちよつと…」, 「ですが…」, 「はい…」, etc. Yet the subtlety itself is perhaps the most unique and beautiful part of the Japanese language.

According to Japanese author Junichiro Tanizaki in his essay *In Praise of Shadows*, this subtlety even shapes Japanese homes. Westerners fill their houses with many large windows “to create as few shadows as possible and to expose the interior to as much light as possible.” However, the beauty of a Japanese *tatami* room depends on the “pale white glow of the *shoji*” to create indistinct shadows. Even the lone placement of a scroll and flowers “serve not as ornament but rather to give depth to the shadows.” (p. 31)

Hasegawa Tohaku (1539-1610) was famous for subtlety during a time when warlords prized extravagant paintings to show their wealth. I had the opportunity to see his painting, *Pine Trees*, a Japanese National Treasure, at the Tokyo National Museum. Through delicate variations of ink in painting just a few trees, the painting suggests a flowing breeze across an entire hillside. A lone pine extending upwards out of the painting suggests an expanse bigger than the canvas could portray. Low-hanging mists appear to



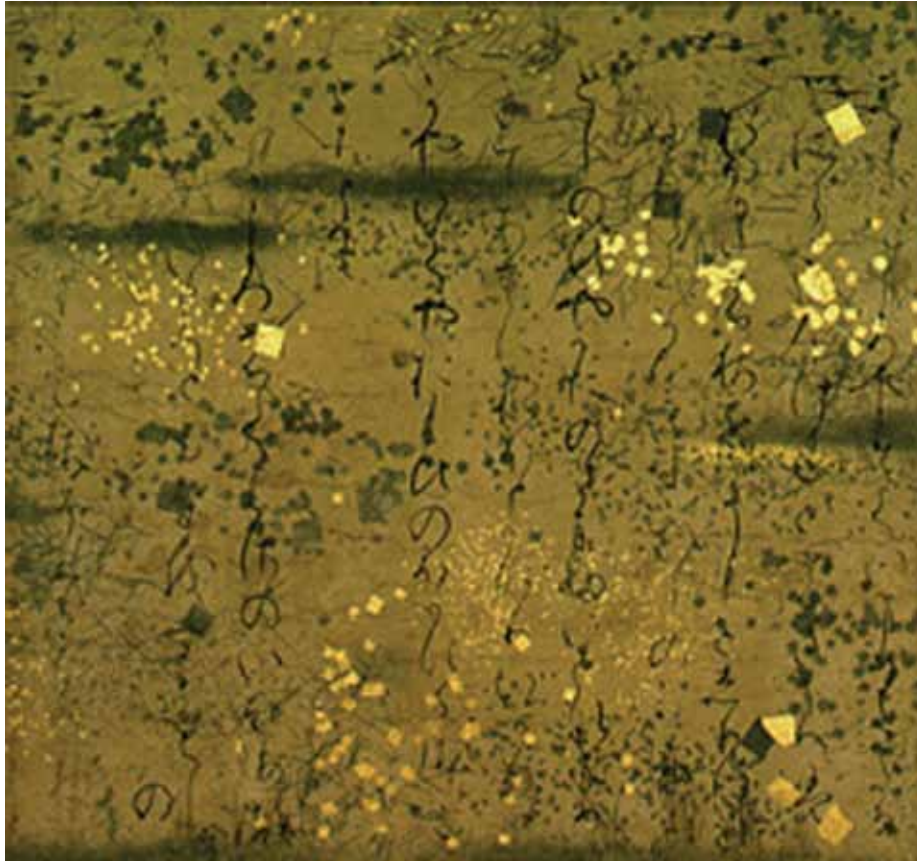
exist without being painted.

Examples of brilliant simplicity abound in Japanese art. Rock gardens suggest whole landscapes of ocean, islands and forests. *Bonsai* trees, *ikebana* and calligraphy all suggest beauty beyond the objects themselves. *Wabi-sabi*, a term invented to describe this characteristic, is found universally through Japanese art.

Heian writer Sei Shonagan (even with her haughty attitude) found beauty in the simplest of things and made a list in her famous work *The Pillow Book*: “The voice of the autumn cricket, around the end of the ninth month or the beginning of the tenth, so frail and tentative that you scarcely know whether you hear it or not... Waking at dusk or dawn and hearing the wind rustling the bamboo. A mountain village in snow.” (Translated by Meredith McKinney, p. 120)

Senno Rikyu, contemporary of Tohaku, effectively brought a number of arts together with his revolutionary “Way of Tea.” Nearly empty tatami

rooms, simple *ikebana* arrangements, and hanging off-white scrolls with black calligraphy all offer rich meaning in their starkness. The low gate and narrow entrance do not permit the passage of ornamental swords or clothing. The tea bowl and cup are crude in nature, helping the souls of the rich and poor alike to empty themselves. The bitter tea and sweet cake are free



Bible resounds from Genesis to Revelation. The beauty of the gospel is in its simplicity: all we need is Christ. *Sola Gratia. Solus Christus.*

BEAUTY IN SACRIFICE

“A dawn farewell is always drenched in dew, but sad is the autumn sky as never before.” (Chapter 9, “The Sacred Tree,” *The Tale of Genji*)

According to *The Tale of Genji*, autumn is full of vivid beauty because of the poignant sadness at the end of things. As the leaf dies, it bursts into color. As the cold autumn air condenses, “tears” of dew grow in the morning, making the world sparkle.

The Japanese-American painter Makoto Fujimura describes crushing minerals by hand in *nihonga* painting to make microscopic jagged fragments that bring out the

from all extravagance.

The tea ceremony was almost certainly inspired by the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, so let’s not overlook how beautiful the Lord’s Supper can appear to Japanese eyes. A small piece of bread and a sip of wine . . . the understated elegance abounds with incredible depth of humility and simplicity. The crudeness of the bread and wine remind us of our own imperfection, fleshiness, and need for salvation. If we do not eat, we die.

The Lord’s Supper says so much with so little—the gospel wrapped up in two elements. This “good news” consists only of “Jesus died for your sins” but takes a lifetime to understand and live out. This core message of the

brightness of the colors. The “dying” sun produces an explosion of color. A skillful sushi chef creates a beautiful meal from the life of a fish. Cherry blossoms, the very symbol of beauty in Japan, must die to stir our emotions with the beauty of their sacrifice.

On one of my first days in Japan, I was treated to a *kabuki* play in Ginza. The storyline: A foolish servant failed to deliver an urgent message and brought great shame on the city. Only through the sacrifice of the king was the city saved. The king visibly took the weight of the shame on his shoulders and walked away from the city he loved with heavy steps. The beauty of his sacrifice as the play ended left many in tears.



Sheep Big Beauty

羊 + 大 = 美

The concept of beauty in Japan is closely connected with sacrifice. Look, for example, at the *kanji* for beauty. Dr. Tomonobu Imamichi, a professor of aesthetics at Tokyo University, writes: "The ideogram of beauty is made up of the sacrificial sheep on top of an ideogram for 'great,' which I infer to mean 'greater sheep.' It connotes a greater sacrifice, a sacrifice that cannot be boxed in by rituals or self. This greater sacrifice may require sacrifice of one's own life to save the lives of others...This is what is truly beautiful."

Ayako Miura's *Shiokari Pass* presents a vivid image with the story of one

man's sacrifice to save the lives of everyone on a runaway train car. I know one woman who became a Christian because of this book.

These powerful stories of sacrifice abound since the disasters of March 11. The "Fukushima 50" became famous as faceless heroes for staying to stabilize the crippled Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant after 750 other workers were evacuated. One mother described their sacrifice in a tearful interview with a reporter, "My son and his colleagues have discussed it at length and they have committed themselves to die if necessary to save the nation."

One man shared with me his story of braving the tsunami in order to rescue his wife and children. A father told me about his daughter who rescued children from the street shortly after the earthquake, but died because she did not make it to a shelter herself before the tsunami hit. I met the hospital staff of Omachi Hospital in Minami

Soma, just five kilometers from the evacuation boundary near Fukushima, who stayed to help as many people as possible despite potential harmful consequences to their own health.

Sacrifice is beautiful. Jesus tells us this himself in Mark 14:6. When a woman pours all of her savings out as perfume on Jesus' head, he says "Leave her alone. Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me." (NIV) As beautiful as her sacrifice was, it pales in comparison to Jesus' sacrifice. Easter is a celebration of the greatest and most beautiful of all sacrifices.

The Author of Beauty delights to show his attributes through the beauty of all cultures. Perhaps the Japanese sense of beauty in subtlety and sacrifice can help us glimpse more clearly those aspects of God's character. May our God become even more beautiful in our eyes. May we respect and love Japanese culture all the more. May we be subtle and sacrificial as we share this gospel with a world that longs to see that beauty. 卍

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