

Wabi-Sabi, Mono no Aware, and Ma: Tracing Traditional Japanese Aesthetics Through Japanese History

Lauren Prusinski

Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Indiana

Introduction

Japanese cultural standards and definitions of beauty have been nurtured over many generations. Starting in the Heian era, Japan revitalized its focus on the natural world, embracing its unpredictable fluctuations and adopting a sensitivity to and appreciation for nature. The Japanese developed a distinct sense of aesthetics, including *wabi sabi*, *mono no aware*, and *ma*, to guide their feelings in regard to nature and its influence in their art and culture. Each of these aesthetics depicts a different kind of beauty, often describing beauty found in unexpected forms. *Wabi sabi* represents rustic and desolate beauty; *mono no aware*, a fleeting, varying beauty; *ma*, an empty or formless beauty.¹ By defining beauty through these aesthetics, Japan has generated an awareness of the beauty of nature not typically found in other societies, especially in sprawling urban settings. Japan has always been a nation focused on beauty in all realms of culture: in arts like poetry and calligraphy; through rituals such as the ancient tea ceremony; and in contemporary Japan urban life, consumer goods and architecture.

With a keen eye for their surroundings, the Japanese have effectively melded ancient aesthetics with modern advancement, deferring to their natural roots by highlighting rather than diminishing their eternal presence in society. For example, the Kyoto

¹ Roger J. Davies and Osamu Ikeno, “*Bigaku*” in *The Japanese Mind: Understanding Contemporary Japanese Culture* (Boston: Tuttle, 2002), 37-8, 223-24.

Station is a central feature of Kyoto's cityscape, the hub of Kyoto's downtown area, and its modern architecture displays features that characterize urban Japan. While the Kyoto Station exhibits modern innovation in its synthetic grandeur, it still contains elements of simplicity and continuity with nature in its design. Urban development has extended its reach to the base of the Kyoto mountainsides, but the numerous temples and gardens scattered amidst its municipal areas still exemplify the Japanese consciousness of her relationship with nature. The environment that surrounds these manmade temple spaces actually enhances their unnatural qualities—without nature they would simply be cold, unearthly structures isolated from their surroundings. These changing elements of nature amplify the feeling and emotion one has in response to manmade creations among nature's existence, as humans must be constantly aware of their place in the natural world. The Japanese awareness of this heightens the appreciation for these traditional and natural elements in contemporary society. Though sometimes difficult to detect, the integration of nature into an industrialized society is an integral component for beauty to succeed in developing a solid modern culture. Without this integration, nature will appear to combat man's advancements, causing continual opposition between the two domains. By understanding both the origins of these aesthetics and the role they played in ancient Japanese culture, one can understand why they still maintain a large influence in present-day, urban Japan.

Heian Influences

From the beginning of Japan's aesthetic development, China, India and Korea had a strong influence on its culture, indicated by the terms for earlier aesthetics that Japan shared with these other Eastern cultures.² As Professor Andrijauskas points out, however, most of the Japanese aesthetic sensibility originated from Japan's indigenous

² Antanas Andrijauskas, "Specific Features of Traditional Japanese Medieval Aesthetics" in *Dialogue and Universalism*, 13 no. 1/2 (January 2003): 201, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost, accessed February 7, 2011.

Shinto religion, “the essence of which is the awe-inspired deification of nature.”³ While Shinto provided the basis in which ancient aestheticism is grounded, according to Andrijauskas, “Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian, Tantric, and Ch’an” have “constantly adjusted it and enriched it with new ideas,” but the roots of Japanese aesthetics have remained grounded in the celebration and consciousness of nature.⁴ Though outside influences developed and changed Japan’s aesthetics, the pivotal component of the prolonged success of Japanese traditional art is Japan’s limited exposure to or occupation by outside traditions.⁵ Throughout history, Japan experienced periods during which no outside countries interacted with Japan, whether due to either their geographical separation or their preference for cultural division. These extended periods of isolation allowed a traditional, “Japanese-ness” to develop. The aesthetic ideals that emerged from this process “are expressed in situational categories ... of which the most important are *makoto* (truth, natural sincerity), *aware* (enchantment), *okashi* (charm of playful humor), *yugen* (mysterious beauty), *sabi* (veil of antiquity), *wabi* (restrained beauty), *shibui* (aristocratic simplicity), *en* (charm), *miyabi* (tranquility), *hosomi* (subtlety, frailty), *karumi* (lightness), *yubi* (elegance), *sobi* (grandeur), and *mei* (purity, nobility).”⁶

mono no aware, *wabi sabi*, and *ma*, each carries a sense of understated beauty. *Mono no aware* conveys fleeting beauty in an experience that cannot be pinned down or denoted by a single moment or image. Though fragile, this kind of beauty creates a powerful experience for the observer, since it must be fully enjoyed in a specific period of time. Especially in the Heian era, *aware* and *mono no aware* became the prominent aesthetic characteristics and included “the ability to discern and bring out the unique inner charm of every existing phenomenon or thing, to identify oneself with the

³ Andrijauskas, “Specific Features,” 201.

⁴ Andrijauskas, “Specific Features,” 201.

⁵ Andrijauskas, “Specific Features,” 201.

⁶ Andrijauskas, “Specific Features,” 203.

object being contemplated, to empathize with its mysterious beauty.”⁷ According to Andrijauskas, *mono no aware* is “the charm unfolding in the harmony of feeling and reason in which the emotional attitude (*aware*) of the subject fuses with the object (*mono*) being contemplated.”⁸ It is intriguing that an inanimate object contains a sort of spiritual or emotional quality. Understanding and appreciating this intangible quality was a quintessential component of the Heian sensibility. Without awareness for the emotion inhabited by an object, a person in the Heian era could not completely share in the true spiritual essence of the time. Without a solid understanding of this Heian ideal, one was thought of as uncultured or simply lacking spiritual consciousness. Possessing or describing the emotions associated with *mono no aware*, however, can be difficult, as the emotion associated with the object changes as the situation varies. Thus, one must constantly adapt to the changing feeling in the object, which ultimately heightens the participant’s sensitivity for finding the beauty in *mono no aware*. one may feel a sense of joy at the sight of a beautiful, full blossom of *sakura*. In a few hours or days, however, that blossom may have already wilted or fallen to the ground. The observer must remember each component of this process. Thus, fully grasping the meaning of *mono no aware* requires a close view of the characters and surrounding context. In the Heian period, *mono no aware* eventually came to be more closely associated with “melancholy moods,” as the attached, yet changing, emotion was often fleeting, leaving nothing behind but a memory or hint of what might have been there. This fragility of *mono no aware* actually strengthens the power of its beauty; as Andrijauskas explains it, the feeling is a flicker of intense light that may shine brightly, but only for an instant, resulting in a “powerful emotional experience” that can only be felt in the brevity of it.⁹ The beauty lies not in object itself, but in the whole experience, transformation, and span of time in which the object is present and changing.

⁷ Andrijauskas, “Specific Features,” 205.

⁸ Andrijauskas, “Specific Features,” 206.

⁹ Andrijauskas, “Specific Features,” 206.

Wabi sabi depicts a crude or often faded beauty that correlates with a dark, desolate sublimity. An object's outward appearance does not completely determine its *wabi*. The beauty of *wabi* must be taken into account with the feeling in and essence of itself. There is beauty in its state of being rather than only from the observer's subjective view. One cannot describe something as simply exhibiting the quality of *wabi*; rather, it encapsulates its whole spirit. Though two distinct aesthetic terms, *wabi* and *sabi* are often combined to describe richly an event or object that contains strong power in its often faded or raw outward appearance. A dilapidated wooden house, for example, with the sun shining softly through reeds of bamboo that create shadows on the wall would demonstrate *wabi sabi*. *Wabi sabi* is often synthesized to create scenes of a raw quality; that is, one who is knowledgeable about *wabi sabi* may carefully place stepping stones in a garden or meticulously arrange the flora interspersed between the stones to appear as if they arose in that precise array from the ground. Most importantly, however, in applying *wabi sabi* synthetically, one must create a scene that appears *not* to have been arranged by human hands. The arrangement should have flaws that make it appear more natural and random.

Ma represents a beauty in emptiness or formlessness, something that cannot be conveyed by a tangible object or through description.¹⁰ The beauty of *ma* lies in the difficulty of depicting it. Though the artist cannot present an overt sense of its beauty, *ma*'s ambiguity gives it its beauty and timeless quality, allowing it to transcend cultural and spatial boundaries. Just as *mono no aware* cannot be captured in a single moment but must be followed through a span of time, so *ma* creates a boundless feeling that must be traced in relation to the environment in which it lies. An observer cannot simply see its presence and call it *ma*. Rather, the observer must observe all aspects of the surroundings and feel the beauty that lies in the spaces that are unoccupied by material objects or living things. It cannot be captured and identified by a stationary moment. Each of these aesthetics, these discreet concepts of beauty in nature, rely on the observers' keen sense of their surroundings and perception of their experience, and understanding the subtleties of these aesthetics

¹⁰ Andrijauskas, "Specific Features," 211.

makes them more apparent in Japanese art, aesthetic rituals, and architecture throughout Japanese history.

These aesthetics became important early in Japanese history, notably in the Heian era. As mentioned above, Japan's periods of isolation actually created more nationalism, especially in the Heian era, from 794-1185, allowing Japan to develop these ideals to establish their own distinct artistic traditions.¹¹ One woman in particular contributed to this aesthetic development in the Heian period: Murasaki Shikibu. Andrijauskas describes the lives of several observant women, like Murasaki Shikibu, who associated with the court-nobles:

The worldview of these women of the imperial palace was characterized by refined aestheticism, subtle poetic feeling, and a search for a personal relationship with the things, people, natural phenomena, and works of art around them. A world of sensitivity to experience, nature, and art was the element in which these ladies of the imperial palace lived. Especially valued here were an inner aristocracy of personality, subtle taste, and the ability to react to aesthetic phenomena quickly and with a distinctive poetic form.¹²

Seen clearly in the writing of women like Murasaki Shikibu in the Heian era, *mono no aware*, *wabi sabi*, and *ma*, became prominent in all aspects of Heian life. Gaining a strong sense of the meaning of these aesthetics deepens the understanding of and admiration for *The Tale of Genji*, its author, and the basic aesthetics from which her emotive prowess is derived. After familiarizing oneself with these aesthetics, the reader can have a greater appreciation for the reasons Murasaki includes long descriptions of what appear initially to be mundane scenes. Murasaki Shikibu encapsulates *mono no aware* in her novels and poetry, which contain extensive accounts of Heian court life. Through her characters she argues that one should “not trust only feeling or outward appearance, but to delve into the profound essence of aesthetic phenomena.”¹³ Understanding these

¹¹ Andrijauskas, “Specific Features,” 204.

¹² Andrijauskas, “Specific Features,” 205.

¹³ Andrijauskas, “Specific Features,” 209.

underpinnings of her writing, one can begin to note not only the subtleties of her critiques of society and emotion in her descriptions but also the pervasiveness of ancient aesthetic thought.

Though Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji* depicts an era of Japanese history that is so foreign and fantastic to its contemporary reader that one might believe it only to be a fairy tale, the book provides a basis from which one can begin to understand the origins of ancient Japanese aesthetics and how they developed through the centuries following its creation during the Heian period in the early 11th century. Literary scholar Masaharu Anesaki argues in *Art, Life, and Nature in Japan* that the Heian era "was marked by a striking development of sentimentalism in the life of the nobility surrounding the Imperial court," claiming these nobilities had begun to channel this sentimentalism into artistic expression, ultimately influencing the cultural and artistic tastes of the nation as a whole.¹⁴ A time of peace and aesthetic prosperity, the Heian era left room for exploration of and focus on "artistic tastes," and a development of "emotional life" instead of the political or moral life.¹⁵ Anesaki accurately describes court life as a production involving scenes of natural beauty and actors and actresses of grace, poise, and refined sensibilities. He refers to this romantic sentiment using the specific term *aware*, "an emotion of tender affection in which there is both passion and sympathy" and describes typical scenes in which this term might be applicable; "a gay spring festival of dances and music comes to an end...the serenity of the night is broken by the cry of a flying bird — in such moments the sentiment is instinctively felt, for in them joy mingles with a kind of agreeable melancholy."¹⁶ In such moments as these, one can begin to gain insight into the lives and minds of the ancient Japanese.

In *The Tale of Genji*, Murasaki Shikibu often depicts her characters in great detail, highlighting all of their surface qualities and mirroring the Heian court nobles' discerning taste. The author

¹⁴ Masaharu Anesaki, *Art, Life, and Nature in Japan* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1933), 53.

¹⁵ Anesaki, "Art, Life, and Nature," 56.

¹⁶ Anesaki, "Art, Life, and Nature," 65.

describes a scene in which Genji peers in on the residence of an old bishop, gaining his first sight of his future love, Murasaki:

The evening was long. He took advantage of a dense haze to have a look at the house behind the wattled fence. Sending back everyone except Koremitsu, he took up a position at the fence. In the west room sat a nun who had a holy image before her. The blinds were slightly raised and she seemed to be offering flowers. She was leaning against a pillar and had a text spread out on an armrest. The effort to read seemed to take all her strength. Perhaps in her forties, she had a fair, delicate skin and a pleasantly full face, though the effects of illness were apparent. The features suggested breeding and cultivation. Cut cleanly at the shoulders, her hair seemed to him far more pleasing than if it had been permitted to trail the usual length. Beside her were two attractive women...Much the prettiest was a girl of perhaps ten in a soft white singlet and a russet robe. He saw how lovely she would one day be. Rich hair spread over her shoulders like a fan. Her face was flushed from weeping.¹⁷

This passage typifies the style of description that Murasaki Shikibu uses in the novel. Her writing not only depicts the observations of the author, but also reflects the typical views that Genji has of his environment and the people in it. He often closely observes the surroundings in which he finds himself, noting the details of people and especially nature. “Seeing” the smallest details from Genji’s view, the reader gains a closer perspective of this airy world. One can create a clear image of the women Murasaki describes through Genji’s eyes and, therefore, become more engaged in the story. The author creates a novel heavily laden with description, but these seemingly superficial elements of the story provide the most detailed images of Murasaki’s characters. By describing the scenes through an involved character, through Genji’s eyes, Murasaki gives readers a clear sense of the other characters and their feelings, engaging them more in the story as a result. These small details are necessary for a true appreciation and sensibility of the subtleties involved in the beauty of Japanese aesthetics.

Adopting this mindset as one continues through *The Tale of Genji*, one will notice that the emotion attached to these small moments increases dramatically. In passages such as the scene in

¹⁷ Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. Edward G. Seidensticker in 1976 (New York: Vintage Classics, 1990), 70.

which Genji attempts to make amends with the Rokujō Lady following their turbulent romantic endeavors, one can feel the sadness and brevity of life through nature:

It was over a reed plain of melancholy beauty that he made his way to the shrine. The flowers were gone and insects hummed sadly in the wintry tangles. A wind whistling through the pines brought snatches of music to most wonderful effect, though so distant that he could not tell what was being played...The shrine gates, of unfinished logs, had a grand and awesome dignity for all their simplicity, and the somewhat forbidding austerity of the place was accentuated by clusters of priests talking among themselves and coughing and clearing their throats as if in warning. It was a scene quite unlike any Genji had seen before. The fire lodge glowed faintly. It was all in all a lonely, quiet place....¹⁸

The first sentence demonstrates a common theme found in *The Tale of Genji* and Japanese aesthetics: a beauty that coincides with some kind of sadness. This passage depicts the aesthetic quality of *wabi sabi*, the Japanese term that describes both an austere beauty that one often can only observe briefly and loneliness in nature. Murasaki's description of the absence of activity in the area surrounding the shrine and in the shrine itself brings a cold and desolate quality to nature and creates an earthy, but fragile, sense to the scene. Murasaki combines this *wabi sabi* with *ma* to create a lonely, empty scene, but the faint glow of the fire gives some warmth to it. The emptiness of the shrine and the distance between Genji and the priests in the shrine create a kind of aura around the scene. Though Genji seems slightly perturbed by this lonely feeling, he approaches it as though he has expected the arrival of this feeling and can almost transform his emotions to fit the scene. Andrijauskas argues that this kind of feeling may be too typical of the Heian era, that the actual court-life art would dictate a more symmetrical, planned kind of beauty. Perhaps Genji's ability to conform to specific situations seems too deliberate or perfunctory, but it seems he simply has a heightened sensitivity to these moments and corrects his own posture accordingly. As he travels along his way to the shrine, one can feel the cold breeze and the forbidding aura surrounding the shrine, but it is not a fear-inducing scene; rather, it creates a tension that draws the reader into the tale and, again, the

¹⁸ Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, 187.

reader becomes more involved in it and begins to grasp more fully the more finely tuned aesthetics of Japanese culture.

This passage in *The Tale of Genji* depicts only a small portion of the emotional tension that permeates the novel. The skill with which Murasaki melds both beauty and sorrow into the same sentence exemplifies her true consciousness of *mono no aware*, *wabi sabi*, and *ma* throughout the novel. One can imagine the simultaneous emptiness and vitality in this passage. Though the physical life of Genji's surroundings is gone, he both recognizes it for what it once was and still finds beauty in it. Genji's attitude and observational skills exemplify those that all of the nobility were expected to have in the Heian court: a strong sense of time, place, and occasion, all carefully ordered and valued as such.

Zen Buddhism

Though the Heian era signified a cultivation of wealthy elegance, Zen Buddhism eventually overthrew these refined aesthetics, bringing in instead a more rustic ideology.¹⁹ Until the thirteenth century, Shinto remained the main influence on Japanese aesthetics, focusing the eye on the power of nature and its beauty. Anthropologist Rupert Cox explains that attention shifted from the sophisticated courtly art typically associated with the Heian era to more ritualistic, structured art with religious affiliation in Zen Buddhism.²⁰ At this time, Japanese aesthetics began to include more ascetic undertones—crude and irregular elements in art became more valued—and an aesthetic was developed through an even greater sensitivity to the world than had been created in the Heian era. The religious roots of Zen grounded this aesthetic in more spiritual characteristics, and less of a distinction was then made between ascetic and aesthetic, the elite and the common.²¹ Philosopher Izutsu Toshiko points out, for the first time, “asymmetry, incompleteness, imperfectness, unshapeliness and crude plainness... became... something highly valued as aesthetic

¹⁹ Andrijauskas, “Specific Features,” 209.

²⁰ Rupert A. Cox, “A World Apart,” in *The Zen Arts*, (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2006), 53.

²¹ Cox, “A World Apart,” 53.

properties” rather than the previously desired polished, standardized forms of beauty.²² Anesaki provides examples of this shift toward the “dislike of symmetry,” from the lack of symmetrical designs on decorated swords and unequal pillars that stand in the *toko-no-ma* reception room of the Japanese home to the asymmetrical, and seemingly spontaneous arrangement of stones and trees in traditional gardens.²³

Ironically, one may note exceptions in religious architecture: temples often exhibit clear structural symmetry and geometry that are consistent throughout their designs, and pagodas display sloping roofs that are always assembled neatly and evenly spaced on top of each other. Anesaki argues, however, that though symmetrical, one should view these buildings along with their surroundings—the value and beauty of these constructions are lost if one does not note the placement of them.²⁴ Though built to embrace spiritual aspects of nature, these structures are still human constructions. As a result, all effort is made to envelop man’s work in nature’s existence, and this Japanese ideal demonstrates again the sharp consciousness of their surroundings.

Though *mono no aware* and *wabi sabi* have already been ascribed as the more refined beauty of the Heian era, both still played a prominent role in the aesthetics of Zen Buddhism. Whereas *mono no aware* in the Heian era was associated with both a feeling of sadness and an awareness of short-lived happiness, Zen began to shape it to emphasize the beauty associated with the object itself so that a practitioner would become more aware of his feelings in response to it. Japan scholar Horst Hammitzsch in his book, *Zen in the Art of the Tea Ceremony* describes *wabi* and *sabi* as the result of the fleeting moment depicted by *mono no aware*. More distinctly different from the typical vibrant and rich beauty of the Heian era, Hammitzsch describes *sabi* as “the absence of obvious beauty” and contrasts the

²² Toshihiko Izutsu, *The Theory of Beauty in Classical Aesthetics of Japan*, (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 47.

²³ Anesaki, “Art, Life, and Nature,” 14.

²⁴ Anesaki, “Art, Life, and Nature,” 15.

beauty in the colorless, the old, and the fragile with the rich, exuberant, energetic and labile beauty.²⁵ He claims that though old or faded, the worn that has become beautiful simply exemplifies the power and longevity of a kind of beauty. As the years pass, the youthful, bright beauty will fade, but the steadfastness of *sabi* will be shown more fully.

Hammitzsch further explains that *sabi* does not simply signify age and wisdom, but also tranquility and solitude.²⁶ These qualities relate back to the roots from which *wabi sabi* is defined in Zen Buddhism. As mentioned, these qualities of *wabi sabi* and *mono no aware* seen in Zen Buddhism were often reflections of those that typified beauty in the Heian era. Whereas Heian culture may have required a person to have material wealth and freedom to partake in an aesthetic sensibility, however, to attain this awareness of aesthetics in Zen, one must simply embrace these kinds of beauty in the heart and mind.²⁷ In essence, though more ambivalence evolved as a result of these less defined conditions, more people were able to dedicate themselves to the ways of Zen, creating a more universal cultural aesthetic of *wabi sabi* and *mono no aware*.

These aesthetic qualities are best exemplified in the art of the tea ceremony as outlined by Hammitzsch. Hammitzsch guides the reader through the entire ceremony beginning with a walk through the teahouse gardens and ending with the tea master's serving of the tea. To begin the tea ceremony, one first enters the garden that lies in front of the tea house, asking if this garden is "really a world made by human hands," as its landscape looks like that of a coastal valley of one of Japan's islands, imagining that the ocean lies just in the distance.²⁸ One walks through the garden, noting the small hut that designates the *machiai*, the waiting house that stands amidst bamboo clusters, covered in dark, damp moss, and observes an intimate,

²⁵ Horst Hammitzsch, *Zen in the Art of the Tea Ceremony*, trans. Peter Lemesurier (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1988), 46

²⁶ Hammitzsch, "Zen in the Art," 46.

²⁷ Hammitzsch, "Zen in the Art," 46.

²⁸ Hammitzsch, "Zen in the Art," 11.

secluded loneliness, a characteristic of *sabi* described above.²⁹ Each step increases the dampness and deepens the silence of the walk to the teahouse and, perhaps, one can envision light footprints left in the moss covering the stone walkway and hear the soft and slow pattering of small footsteps the guest makes on the way to the hut. The *machiai* gives way to another garden, this one scattered with more moss-covered stones whose silent reverence is broken up by the trickling of a small creek that runs over nearby pebbles and whose low stance is disrupted by sprouts of foliage jutting between the flat stones.³⁰

This transition period before the guests travel further to the house for the ceremony provides time for silent reflection and meditation. The guests listen to the rustling of the leaves through the bamboo shoots, smell the dampness in the air, and feel the cool air brush against their skin. Contrasted with the usual bustling, inviting nature of the tea master's house, the area is now empty and isolated. One concentrates only on a narrow stone path as one steps toward the house, watching as the world of the everyday disappears in the background with each step one takes.³¹ In silence and with a bow, the host greets his guests who have finally reached him. Another path lies ahead, its stepping stones lined methodically while still appearing natural with their coverings of green moss and grasses, leading the way to the stone wash basin and bamboo scoop that are used for spiritual purification.³² the guest must be engrossed in the ritual before the actual ritual begins. One can feel the spiritual nature that is infused in this journey through the gardens to the final destination, and this heightened spirituality creates a more intimate experience, strengthening one's consciousness of space and time.

Though Zen is not associated with planned, symmetrical beauty, there is still an ideal that lies in the seemingly haphazard arrangement of the stones that wind through the garden. They appear to be naturally placed, and that is the point. The skill required

²⁹ Hammitzsch, "Zen in the Art," 11.

³⁰ Hammitzsch, "Zen in the Art," 13.

³¹ Hammitzsch, "Zen in the Art," 13.

³² Hammitzsch, "Zen in the Art," 14.

to make the planned appear not so is immense, and the Zen practitioner who can achieve this effect must truly understand this simplicity and awareness of nature as its raw quality as defined by *wabi* and *sabi*. One can prepare for the tea ceremony simply by immersing oneself in this *wabi*, the rusticity and simplicity that the host has so graciously and meticulously prepared. In this moment, the guest is finally ready for the task ahead, and Hammitzsch describes the scene of the teahouse that lies ahead:

*There it is, the chashitsu, the tea-room. Expression of an indescribable taste; artistic and yet not artificial, consciously conceived and yet so pure in form and so natural in construction that it seems almost unbelievable to behold. Can the human creative spirit have produced such a work of nature? One might call the tea-room a mere hut, but the fact that it displays this extraordinary refinement of taste. A deeply overhanging thatched roof, thick with moss. The guttering a length of split bamboo. The walls clad half in reed-wattles, half in daub. The entrance a low sliding-door covered with rice-paper of spotless white.*³³

This lengthy description lends great integrity to the aesthetic quality of the tearoom. One can hear the restrained excitement in Hammitzsch as he describes the rustic but carefully designed qualities of it. This small hut embodies the ideal of beauty in Zen—its beauty is not seen in typical polished grandeur with vibrant colors and rich materials. Rather, the guest is now sensitized to the more natural, hidden beauty of the building in its natural surroundings. Clearly, Hammitzsch is surprised by just how natural it appears—he wonders if this structure had not just grown up from the ground alongside the bamboo. This is the epitome of Japanese *wabi sabi* in the sense that a man-made form, if correctly produced, can be so immersed in the natural beauty that surrounds it that it cannot be disconnected from it. What may have initially been passed over as an old, worn down hut is now seen as an idyllic setting in which one can truly appreciate the nature that encompasses it.

Finally, the guests enter the tearoom, first to view a vase that holds a sprig of a plant that exemplifies the current season. *Tatami*, mats woven with rice-straw, cover the floor of the small tearoom with only a small hole cut out of the center for the fire pit in which

³³ Hammitzsch, “Zen in the Art,” 15.

the tea will be prepared.³⁴ An iron kettle hovers above the ash in the depths of the pit, and a small incense-burner and feather duster lie nearby.³⁵ The sprig in the corner of the room is the only piece that serves as decoration for the tearoom, thus amplifying the simplicity and solitude of the space in which the guests now find themselves. Silence still fills the space until all of the guests have completed their contemplation of the room—this is simply an additional observance that heightens one’s awareness of beauty in the simplicity and even emptiness of the area. The simple and natural elements of the room provide a slate free from distraction or interfering thoughts, a key component for recognizing how the surface qualities of the tearoom relate to Zen thought in which the ceremony is grounded.

Once the guests have settled in and begun conversing with one another, the host enters the room, greets his guests and then proceeds to retrieve several items for the ceremony, arranging them precisely as he starts the fire under the kettle.³⁶ Through careful ritual, the incense burner is passed from each guest’s *fukusa*, a small cloth used for wiping the utensils in the tea ceremony, to another’s for each guest to examine more closely.³⁷ As with every other part of the tea ceremony, this ritualistic inspection of the items in the tearoom not only demonstrates respect toward the tea master, but also grounds the guest in the ceremony, focusing his or her gaze and mindset on the various elements of the room. The guests now see several utensils prescribed for tea preparation: a tea bowl, a whisk, a small linen cloth, a tea scoop, and a water vessel, dipper and lid stand. All of these pieces are carefully arranged in preparation for the ceremony. Though the whisk, the linen cloth, and the dipper appear to be crisp and new, the rest of the utensils clearly show their age and demonstrate the tea master’s highly sensitive aesthetic perception.³⁸ Here special qualities of the utensils are noted. The tea-bowl is not

³⁴ Hammitzsch, “Zen in the Art,” 15.

³⁵ Hammitzsch, “Zen in the Art,” 15.

³⁶ Hammitzsch, “Zen in the Art,” 16.

³⁷ Hammitzsch, “Zen in the Art,” 16.

³⁸ Hammitzsch, “Zen in the Art,” 18.

of a glossy, vibrant hue; rather, it bears a dull, faded glaze and may not have a perfectly round base. *Sabi* characterizes this quality of the tea-bowl, as the bowl's imperfection creates a beauty that would otherwise be ignored. Its imperfection magnifies its raw quality, an essential component of traditional *sabi* beauty present throughout the Zen tea ceremony.

Zen Buddhism signaled a shift in Japanese aesthetics from the prior cultural refinement of the Heian period to a more simplistic view of beauty in more raw and natural elements. Though Japanese culture changed its perspective from the beauty of wealth in the Heian era to these ascetic qualities, the underlying principles of *mono no aware*, *wabi sabi*, and *ma* still remained prominent in aesthetic awareness as a whole, and these fundamentals would continue to permeate Japanese culture.

Ancient Aesthetics in Contemporary Japan

Clearly, aesthetic values based in both morality and spirituality were present in ancient Japanese culture and society. In examining modern culture, environment, architecture, and garments in urban Japan, however, one can see the continual penetration of these values, *wabi sabi*, *mono no aware*, and *ma*. In the more traditional setting of Kyoto, Japan, the contrasts of simple with elegant, rustic with refined, and ancient with modern can be seen clearly in the cityscape, from the traditional *machiya* to the modern Kyoto station. While these contrasts are definite, there is something about the opposing elements that seem to meld with and complement each other. Just as the Zen arts portrayed natural works of art that appeared to sprout and grow purely from the earth, even though man may have laid a heavy hand in their construction, so also does contemporary Japan juxtapose dissimilar elements in a way that actually results in a harmonious blend of the contrasts.

Kyoto Station, for example, offers a sound example of integrating natural components with synthetic materials and design, a structure of such enthralling scale and complexity that still maintains continuity with the environment that surrounds it. My field notes describe my first experience with this important feature of Kyoto.

I looked toward a long series of escalators that were lined up in front of us, scaling the steep stairs next to them as if they made a beanstalk that would take us to another realm. As we made our way to the top, I glance at the breadth

of the complex structure above my head. An intricate and asymmetric latticework, it created a sort of dome, and like a complicated inverted bird's nest, its construction shielded the main entrance area of the station. It could not protect us, however, from the elements to which we were exposed at the top. The drizzle of the rain that Monday morning felt cold but slightly refreshing on my skin. Though the mist created a hazy view of the city, we gazed out over a city that has been limited in its expansion by the surrounding mountains, but it was nothing like I had expected. It appeared to go on forever, until the silhouette of the low-lying mountains came into my view.³⁹

These first moments in Kyoto provided a clear vision of what the rest of the visit would entail. Though the station enclosed the hustle and bustle of passengers hurrying from one platform to their next destination, it somehow subdued this hectic activity with its own architecture: the openness and simplicity of its design muted the travelers' chaos. The absence of material substances to occupy oneself seemed intentional: the observation deck served simply for viewing the city, even if it could only be seen through thick, fog-covered glass. The modern escalators led up to the open air, revealing the natural environment above. Though the weather was not perfect, it gave the station a more natural feel—the “bird nest” roof sheltered the main level from the rain, but it opened on the upper levels, leaving space for the sky and the wind to pass through it. While some may feel that being protected from the elements may offer a more pleasant experience in the station, this ingenious design enables visitors to view the city and mountain-scape from an urban perspective. Though undoubtedly planned in an asymmetrical design, there was a flow and beauty in the structure itself, and this feeling was not isolated from the people who inhabited it. Instead of constructing a more efficient-looking space that would compact its quarters and organize movement within it, organized chaos ensued; people rushed past each other in the space below as this structured, intriguing piece of art grounded and directed them to their destinations.

³⁹ Lauren Prusinski, “Accounts of personal experiences while studying abroad in Japan,” (Kyoto, Hiroshima, Osaka, Tokyo: 28 February – 8 March 2011), 28 Feb 2011.

Though urban Japan has integrated these aesthetics in larger architecture, smaller, more personal spaces have integrated natural elements, as well, clearly seen in popular house ware and lifestyle retail shops. “J-Period,” a shop in Tokyo and Kyoto markets house ware items that combine natural elements with modern flair. “J-Period” incorporates these rustic designs into contemporary house wares and utensils to create home environments that reflect more traditional cultural elements. The “J-Period” website, with a plain white background and streamline font, is simple, yet elegant, and is itself labeled merely with “J.” “J-Period” emphasizes the beauty in negative space by utilizing a kind of *ma* in their “Concept” page and by presenting their mantra in short blocks of plain text on a stark white background. The text reads:

Japanese believe that using natural materials and keeping things simple makes for beauty.

J. blends Japanese beauty and modern style to propose the concept of “New Harmony”.

J. invites you to experience a living space devoid of ornamentation. Simple luxury.⁴⁰

This “New Harmony,” in reality, is quite ancient, but this keen awareness of traditional elements allows “J-Period” to reach this aesthetic harmony. This “Concept” page indicates most clearly the style of “J-Period”, as its simplicity focuses the eye on the several lines of text, creating a streamline explanation of their merchandise while creating a calm and almost spiritual experience for the shopper. Their creations clearly reflect their belief in eliminating embellishments and highlighting the imperfections; this focuses the eye on the natural components of the wares and almost bares the pieces to uninhibited scrutiny. Their concept, however, demonstrates clearly their confidence in the natural and raw qualities of their products and how they appeal to contemporary Japanese culture. “J-Period” utilizes natural materials from locations in Japan, like porcelain from Aichi, tin from Toyama, and cedar from Akita.

The store displays wares of “simple luxury,” including unpolished porcelain teacups and natural wooden rice bowls. In viewing some of the “J-Period” pieces more closely, one can see that

⁴⁰ *J-Period*. BALS, n.d., accessed March 25, 2011, <http://www.j-period.com/en/>

certain ceramic cups do not exhibit perfect circularity—this intentional flaw demonstrates both the awareness and the adoption of the Heian and Zen *wabi sabi*. The “*risogama* rice bowl *kobiki*,” for example, does not have a flush, circular rim, and its plain beige ceramic surface is speckled with small dents from where air bubbles must have burst following the glazing process.⁴¹



Risogama rice bowl *kobiki* (J-Period.com)

These small imperfections enhance the raw quality of the dish, harking back to the tea ceremony’s natural roots.

Similarly, *Sou Sou*, a Japanese clothing shop in Kyoto, mixes traditional elements with modern style. *Sou Sou*’s “Concept” page defines their goal as “Creating modern design based on Japanese tradition.”⁴² *Sou Sou* modifies elements of the traditional *kimono* and *tabi*, the socks worn with *geta* sandals, to create modern, fashion-forward apparel that reflects subtly recognizable elements generally seen in traditional, currently more ceremonial, garments. *Sou Sou* attempts to modernize the *tabi* sock by transforming it into an atypical, somewhat whimsical split-toe shoe decorated with modern elements, like hound’s-tooth check or rich red dye. Their signature “kimono sleeve shirt” reflects the square, draping sleeves of the traditional *kimono*, but the neckline is not the cross-over collar seen in the *kimono*. This blouse clearly shows the melding of tradition with modern design.

⁴¹ *J-Period*, accessed March 25, 2011.

⁴² *Sou Sou*, Wakabayashi, n.d. accessed March 26, 2011, [http:// www.sousou.co.jp/](http://www.sousou.co.jp/)



Square Neck Shirt with Kimono Slv Plum Tree (Sousou.co.jp)

Other blouses do include the cross-over collar that creates a v-neck visible in all conventional *kimono*. Traditionally, this v-neck was styled in many different ways to signify the age, marital status, and cultural propriety of the wearer. She must be conscious of how each identity is reflected in the positioning and depth of her neckline, so this v-neck is symbolic—customarily, a lower, steeper “v” is permitted for older, married women, while a younger woman would wear a more closely fitted collar. As these more traditional elements evoke earlier decades, by wearing this style, the wearer may have some appreciation for more traditional customs and demonstrate a reverence for established Japanese culture, but these traditional elements prevail in modern Japanese society whether or not the wearer makes a conscious decision to purchase the clothing. The presence of this clothing reflects how these natural elements have already permeated modern Japanese culture.

While *Sou Sou*'s styles imitate specific elements of the traditional Japanese garb, the prints used to decorate the clothing are often colorful, modern geometric patterns to highlight its appeal for a modern consumer. They also, however, reflect an older sense of design, as many of the patterns are clearly traditionally-oriented with a modern twist. The “kimono sleeve shirt,” for example, exhibits a bold black and white pattern. The stark contrast creates a modern flare, but the plum motif indicates a more traditional design. *Ume* blossoms represent spring and were used heavily in traditional *kimono* designs. The combination of the modern colors with older and more nature-inspired design creates a piece that the modern consumer can embrace. Some designs even bear patterns that reflect *aizome* indigo weaving seen in the clothing of the traditional rural laborer. The traditional dyeing process utilized flowers and other plants to create the dyes, like fermented indigo for the *aizome*. While *Sou Sou*'s split-

toe shoes utilize bright colors and bold contemporary patterns, many also incorporate patterns like the arabesque, *sakura*, *sayagata*, or family crests seen in figured-silk of *kosode* worn by poised women of Japan centuries ago. *Sou Sou*'s sharp attention to detail and cultural accuracy indicate its effectiveness in blending two very different cultural eras of Japan, a link that must be carefully placed for the consumer not only to respond, but to react approvingly, as well. Both "J-Period" and *Sou Sou* demonstrate the embrace of traditional culture in a modern, urban society, lending further evidence for the existence and approval of traditional aesthetics in modern Japanese life.

These examples demonstrate how the continuity of Japanese aesthetic culture has driven innovative developments for incorporating traditional aspects into modern architecture, consumerism, and other components of everyday Japanese life. While the Kyoto Station depicts traditional elements on a large scale in its architecture and *Sou Sou* provides the Japanese with links to the past in their material possessions, timeless qualities of ancient temples and shrines that still stand prominently amidst the urban stretch of Kyoto are also important for understanding the beauty of the ancient world in contemporary Japan. *Kinkakuji*, the Golden Pavilion, and *Ryōanji*, the Zen temple known for its famous rock garden, exemplify this Japanese aesthetic continuity, and I was struck by the influence they have still in modern Japanese life.

Following a 9:30am breakfast Tuesday morning, we traveled to Kinkakuji for another rain-filled touring day. The rain was harder that day, and it was difficult to concentrate on anything but the colder temperature. My eyes focused on the gravel path as we made our way to the site, and I attempted to miss any puddles. Upon entering the area to view the pavilion, I waited by turn to make my way to the railing to take my set of photographs. I was in awe of just how gold Kinkakuji actually appeared. Against a background of tiny islands of small twisted pines, bloomless trees, and a pond dark and rippled with raindrops, the pavilion appeared to float on the small pond and stood out to me—it was bright, of course, but in a muted way. Its gold leaf was clear and impressive, but not overwhelming. A gold phoenix stood at its peak, and I imagined its feathers a bit dampened along with its pride. Though warmer weather and sunshine may have enhanced the temple's glow and visitors' immediate draw to it, in that the moment, the more subdued gold hue of the pavilion demonstrated the qualities of wabi sabi. There was a kind of quiet isolation in its bold presence near the

*water. Though easily recognizable as the prized attraction, there was a sense of quiet loneliness and age in its structure. I felt myself drawn to it as if its quiet depths contained a very empty spirit. As we journeyed along the small path that brought us closer to it, its loneliness never went away. I kept turning back, expecting some kind of miraculous glow to appear from within, but it held its same somewhat muted gold hue despite its sheet of wealth painted onto it. I peered through crooked pine branches soaked with rain at the temple's soft patchwork of gold leaf before turning to follow the winding path to other areas of the grounds that awaited me.*⁴³

Kinkakuji provided an unexpected taste of traditional Japanese aesthetics due to the weather that day. Though a piece of architecture like this one may be created to serve a certain purpose, whether as a religious temple or to accommodate an emperor, its intentions may not always be matched by the nature that envelops it. That is, *Kinkakuji* had been wrapped in gold leaf for an ostentatious display when the sun's rays hit its walls, but this day provided only cloudy gloom that muted its wealth. Though the rain and clouds may not have set the building's metallic walls ablaze in light, however, they still managed to highlight its glory against a gray backdrop. Perhaps the Japanese perception is true—they do not believe in recreating the world or nature. Instead, it is nature that controls the expression of what humans attempt to place in it. Similarly, *Kinkakuji* seemed to reflect beauty in the sense of *mono no aware* on this day, a beauty in the sense of the feeling of the building within its surrounding environment rather than viewing beauty solely in the construction of the building itself. As described earlier, *wabi sabi* is a subjective perception of beauty, the beauty must be in the eye of the beholder, but in this case, it seems rather that it is beautiful in the sense just described. *Wabi sabi's* beauty changes with its changing surroundings, because it cannot be completely isolated from them. It is nature that creates an energy that ebbs and surges in coincidence with humankind's work at every passing moment. In addition, as indicated by the meaning of the term *aware*, there is something deeper in these notions of beauty, a sense of melancholy or a reflective quality. The Japanese do not simply celebrate color and vibrancy and prolonged happiness; rather, they seem to recognize the beauty that exists in the instant, fully knowing the brevity of the moment that

⁴³ Prusinski, "Accounts of personal experiences," 29 Feb 2011.

accompanies the splendor. This sense of fleeting beauty and melancholy was palpable when visiting *Kinkakuji* on a rainy day.

Similarly, *Ryōanji* demonstrates that these ancient aesthetics endure in the ever-changing and developing modern Japan. Again I turn to my own field notes to elucidate this aesthetic. Following a winding road through Kyoto, past bus stops and small shops and restaurants, we arrived at the entrance to *Ryōanji*:

Though the rain still permeated our day, it again added to the effect of the aesthetics of the temple. When we entered the temple grounds, we walked past a large pond spotted with various tiny islands that were connected by small bridges. We passed through a large space of bamboo latticework on which it appeared sakura blossoms would soon be flourishing. Though our early arrival in Japan had prevented our chances of seeing these prized flora, I noted a single tree that contained rich pink ume blossoms that sprawled out and across the bamboo stakes. Their rich hues brightened the damp and dreary space that was otherwise empty apart from the trees in the surrounding area. This short-lived breath of “life” as we made our way to the temple encapsulated an element of wabi sabi again. Without both the haze of the rain and the dim light, we may have easily passed over the bright but single ume tree in our haste. Finally making our way into the temple, I slipped the too-large pair of slippers onto my feet. The last person of the group to enter the temple, I stood back from the ledge of the rock garden where the others were sitting and stared out over it. It may sound odd to imagine enjoying a garden that contains neither flowers or grasses nor fruiting trees, but it was the perfect spot for meditative practices. I shuffled across the dark, worn wooden floorboards and took my place on the ledge beside the others. The large gravel space was surrounded by walls over which an old willow hung its branches, but there were no stray twigs or plants growing within it—just some stray moss on some of the larger rocks. The gravel was raked into lines that made it appear like water. It was intermittently sprinkled with fifteen large rocks, although I counted only twelve. The ability to see all fifteen at once comes from the Buddhist belief that the soul should be able to perceive the garden from many different viewpoints if one concentrates and meditates hard enough. Before trying to find them all, I focused my eyes on the marble-lined channel that lay at the edge of the rock garden and was aligned with the roofline. It was filled with many smooth, ebony-colored stones, and the rain from the eaves above continually dribbled directly into this trench,

*churning the water into a white froth that looked like white-caps of ocean waves. The droplets sounded like a row of leaky faucets were lined up above our heads, and I found myself engrossed in watching and listening to them fall.*⁴⁴

How might *Ryōanji* have looked if the bleak weather had not been present that day? It seemed that on a brighter day, chirping birds or blooming tress may have been distracting, the temple floors would not have felt so dark. We would not have had the full experience of the rock garden's stillness and comfort without the rain. *Wabi sabi* was again noticeable here. The old temple held a sense of rusticity, its dark wooden walls worn lighter from the sun, its rocks encased in old moss, but it was a pure space, nevertheless. It was clear that one could experience a rich spiritual enlightening simply in observing the rock garden. The specific placement of stones highlighted the importance of *ma*, the importance/significance of that which is not visible or does not actually exist. Because some of these rocks are not visible depending on the position of the observer, the observer has to heighten his or her awareness to the environment by partaking in a meditative experience as part of visiting *Ryōanji*. The carefully placed rocks force the observer to become more perceptive of the space, thus increasing the overall aesthetic or meditative appeal of the environment. These details highlight important aspects of traditional aesthetics. *Ryōanji* provides evidence for the importance that these ancient structures still have in an urban city like Kyoto. Similar to other temples, shrines, and tourist sites that we visited, many Japanese people walked through *Ryōanji* as tourists. Their presence, however, did not change the air of the site, that is, the temples and shrines felt targeted toward one who pursued spirituality rather than sight-seeing. Many visitors offered coins and prayers as offerings and purchased tokens that symbolized blessings for good health or safety. Their actions seemed neither kitschy nor frivolous. Rather, the Japanese seem to share a deep respect and an understanding for the importance of these sites and their preservation, ultimately removing themselves from the experiences to highlight the qualities for which the temples and shrines were originally intended. Amidst streets of speeding taxis and rickshaw runners lie the serene gardens and

⁴⁴ Prusinski, "Accounts of personal experiences," 29 Feb 2011.

spiritual havens of Japan's nature. These temples surrounded by nature pepper the city and exemplify the melding of manmade and nature in both the temples themselves and on the larger-scale in the city's sprawl. Though appearing effortless, this combination could not otherwise have been preserved without the keen Japanese consciousness of nature's power and aesthetic prowess.

Conclusion

By examining the Japanese awareness of beauty in nature, in the crude and the lonely, even in that which does not exist, one can begin to grasp the groundings on which Japanese society has defined its sense of beauty. The profundity of these key aesthetics, *wabi sabi*, *mono no aware*, and *ma*, in Japanese culture throughout history and continual change and growth demonstrates that each has significance from both their roots in ancient Japan and their prevalence in modern society. By accepting that humankind can never exist separately from nature, the Japanese are able to embrace that which they cannot overpower, ultimately forming a harmonious atmosphere by weaving their own incomparable creations into that which nature had already provided. Though the history of Japan clearly shows that society, religion, technology, and infrastructure have changed drastically from the time of the Heian era to that of contemporary urban Japan, history also shows that these ancient aesthetics have clearly pervaded the basis of Japanese culture in an impermeable manner and will continue to do so no matter the evolution that lies ahead. Though these advances have made the Japanese less reliant on nature, by maintaining this appreciation for the role nature still plays in an industrial setting and recognizing that technology cannot eliminate nature, the Japanese have created a harmonious balance between human and natural [or mankind and nature]. By accepting these enduring concepts as part of their tradition and origins, the Japanese have created a solid cultural foundation on which they will continue to build even in their future.

The Japanese have immense respect for aesthetics and a deep sense of beauty and simultaneously of the transience of things in life; there is a term for this in the Japanese language, *mono no aware*TM which was coined by the eighteenth century Japanese scholar Motoori Norinaga. Lauren Prusinsky observes *mono no aware* conveys fleeting beauty in an experience that cannot be pinned down or denoted by a single moment or image. Prunski, Lauren. *Wabi-Sabi, Mono no Aware, and Ma: Tracing Traditional Japanese Aesthetics through Japanese History*. *Studies on Asia: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Asian Studies, Series IV, Vol. 2, No. 1*, (March 2012): 25-49. Web.