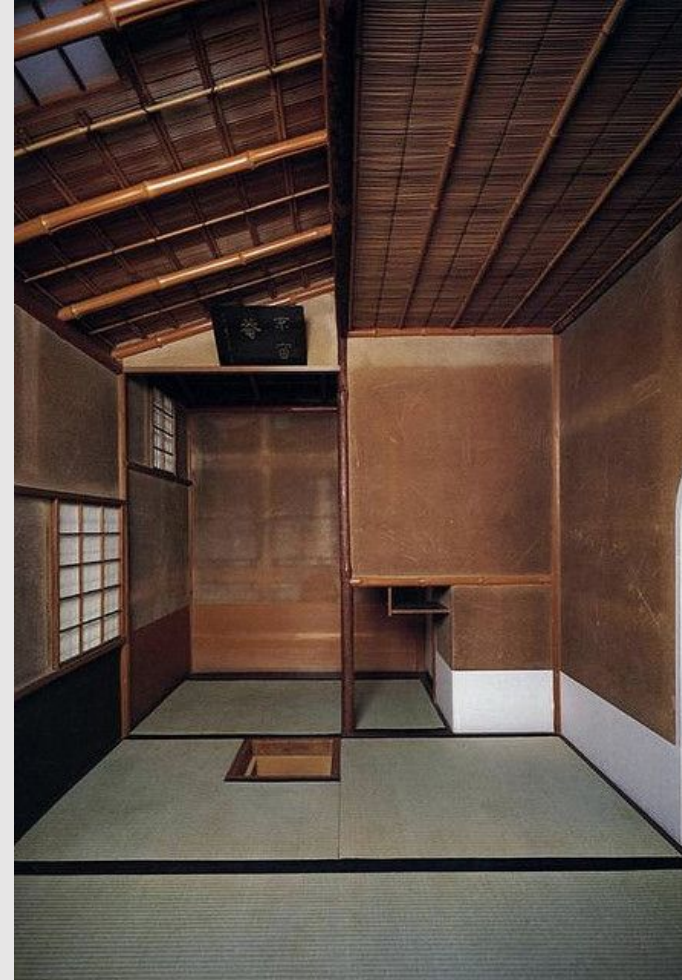


Japanese Aesthetics

HUMN2001 – VIDEO LECTURE – WK5/6
M. Curtis Allen

Influences of Traditional Japanese Thought and Aesthetics

- Shinto
- Classical Chinese Culture
- Buddhism (Zen)



Influences of Traditional Japanese Thought and Aesthetics

Shinto or Kami-no-michi

- Considered an indigenous animistic collection of animistic beliefs about *kami* and attendant practices.
- *Kami* ('spirits' or 'gods') inhabit all things
- It is said that Shinto views the "phenomenon of the world itself as being divine" (Nelson 1996, 26).
- The earliest accounts of Shinto myth come from two early texts, *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*



Influences of Traditional Japanese Thought and Aesthetics

Shinto or Kami-no-michi

- While there is no unified definition of Shinto or its practices, ritual purification plays an essential role in many instances.
- Other practices include the building of shrines (at personal, family, and state levels) making offerings to various kami, and the manufacture of charms and other talismans, as well as the writing of *ema* (a talismanic form of written prayer, usually for good fortune of some kind).
- Shinto is also often thoroughly intermingled with the religious customs and sites of Buddhism in Japan.



Influences of Traditional Japanese Thought and Aesthetics

Zen Buddhism

- Responsible for many aesthetic traditions in Japan
 - Tea culture brought from China by Zen (Chan) monks in the 12th century
 - Brush painting/calligraphy
- Also heavily influenced courtly culture at various times in Japan's history



Periods of Traditional Japanese Culture

Heian Period (平安時代)

- 794 to 1185
- Last classical period of Japan
- Named after the capital (*Heian-kyō*, present day Kyoto)
- Period in which Chinese influence reached its height
 - Buddhism
 - Daoism



Portrait of Murasaki Shikibu, 17th century

Periods of Traditional Japanese Culture

Heian Period (平安時代)

- Also a period of blooming aristocratic court culture in Japan
- Literary Classics
 - Chinese Classics
 - Tendai and Zen Buddhism (e.g. Lotus Sutra, writings of Dogen)
 - Heian classical literature
 - Sei Shōnagon, *The Pillow Book*
 - Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*
 - Waka poetry revival



Tale of Genji, 13th century copy

Periods of Traditional Japanese Culture

- **Edo Period** (江戸時代)
- 1603 and 1868
- The emergence of the Tokugawa Shogunate in Edo (modern day Tokyo)
- Surge in the merchant class of Japan
- And up-tick in middle class wealth, entertainment, and culture.
 - Famous for ‘the floating world’ (*ukiyo*) (pleasure districts of Edo)



Periods of Traditional Japanese Culture

Edo Period (江戸時代)

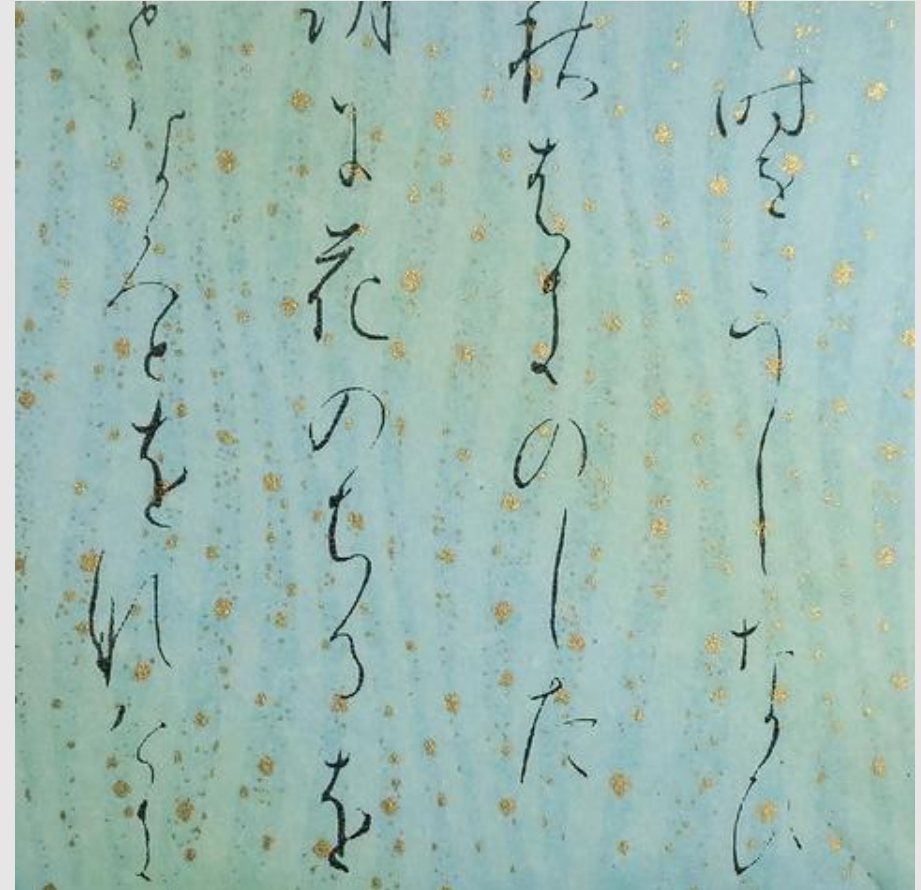
- Poetry
 - Haiku/Bashō
- *Ukiyo-e* woodblock prints
 - were the first dominant form of popular visual art in Japan:
 - are often thought to have a major influence on the development of modern manga in Japan).



Some Noteworthy Arts and Crafts in Japan

Traditional Arts

- Literature
 - Kōan (公案)(Zen teachings, lit. ‘public case’)
 - Waka (和歌, poetry)
 - Novel
 - Diary
 - Haiku (俳句, poetry)



Waka poetry on washi paper

Some Noteworthy Arts and Crafts in Japan

Traditional Arts

- Painting
 - Calligraphy
 - Handscroll
 - *Sumi-e* (ink painting)
 - Painted *fusuma* screens



Musō Soseki (1275–1351),
No Spiritual Meaning (別無工夫),
sōsho style calligraphy.

Some Noteworthy Arts and Crafts in Japan



Hasegawa Tōhaku, *Pine Trees* (松林図 屏風), ~1595, right panel (diptych folding screen)

Some Noteworthy Arts and Crafts in Japan

Traditional Arts

- Theatre
 - *Noh* and *Kyogen* (mask theatre)
 - *Kabuki* (dance theatre)
 - *Bunraku* (puppet theatre)



Some Noteworthy Arts and Crafts in Japan

Traditional Arts cont.

- Tea Ceremony (*chanoyu*)
- Gardening
- Flower arrangement (*ikebana*)
- *Suiseki* (rock art)
- *Bonzai*



Some Noteworthy Arts and Crafts in Japan

Traditional Arts cont.

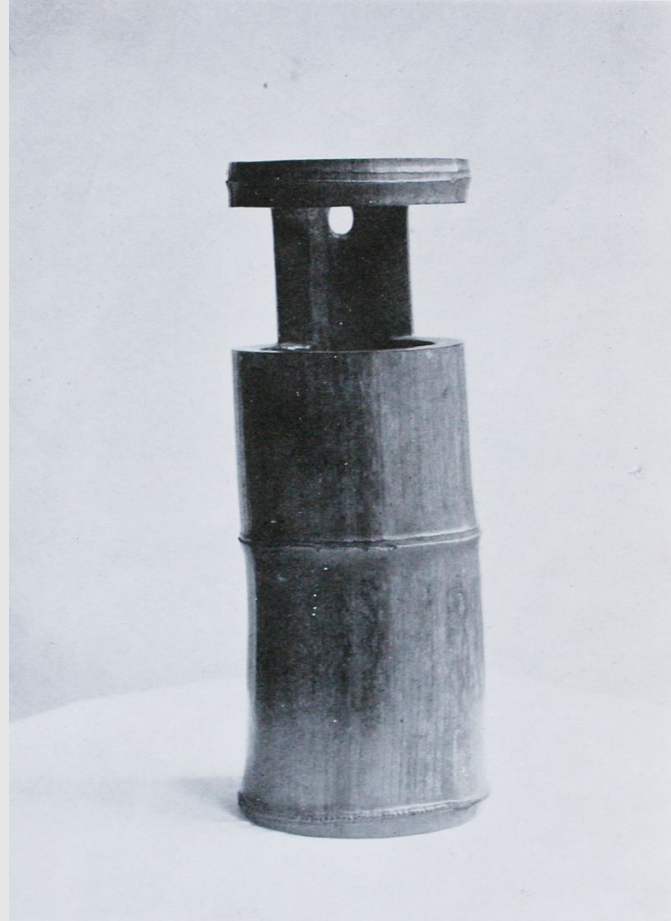
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Sen No Rikyū , bamboo flowerpot, 16th century

Some Noteworthy Arts and Crafts in Japan

Traditional Arts cont.

- Textiles (e.g. *kasuri*, *shibori*)
- Paper (*washi*) and book
- Woodwork/joinery (*sashimono*)
- Lacquer ware
- Pottery
- Cuisine (e.g. *keiseki*)



Some Noteworthy Arts and Crafts in Japan

Traditional Arts cont.

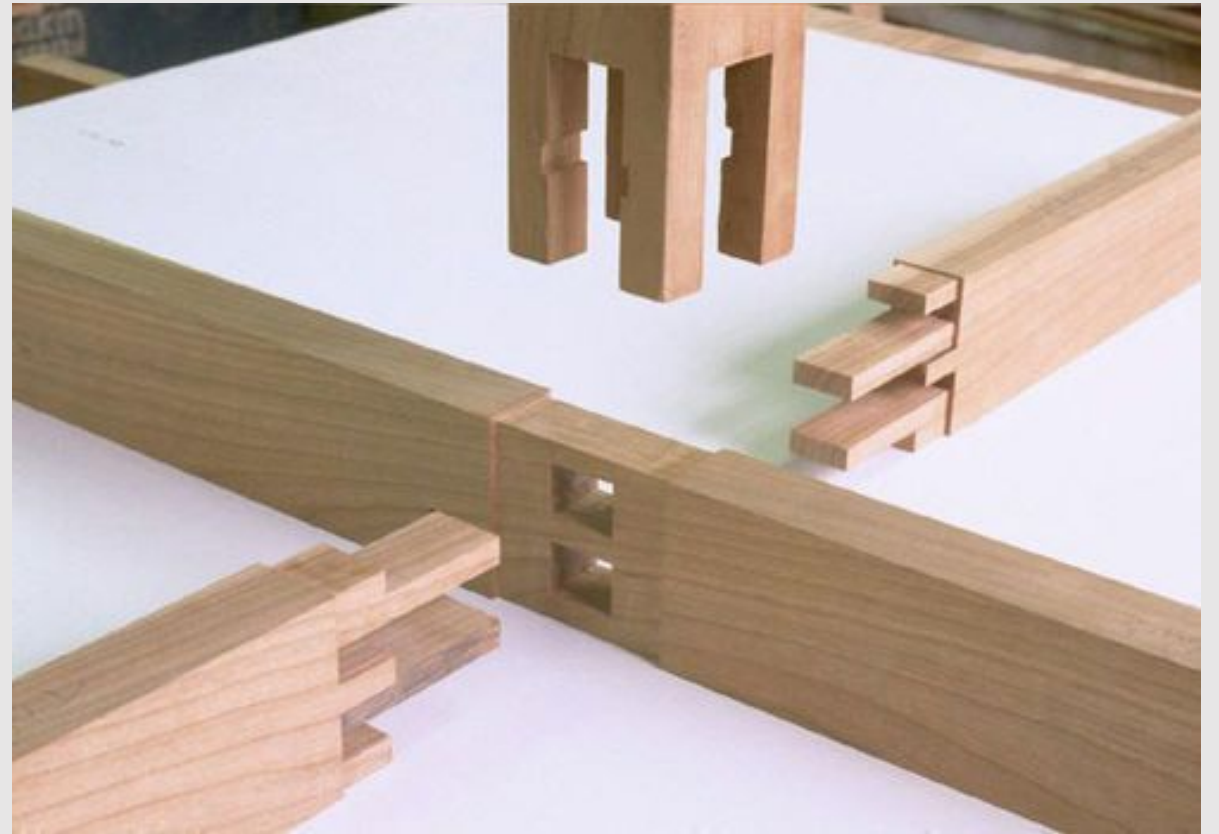
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Some Noteworthy Arts and Crafts in Japan

Traditional Arts cont.

- Architecture
 - *engawa* (shallow surrounding porch)
 - *tokonoma* (alcove)
 - *fusuma* (framed panel sliding doors)
 - *shoji* (lattice and paper sliding room dividers)
 - *tatami* (floor mats)



Some Noteworthy Arts and Crafts in Japan

Traditional Arts cont.

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Some Noteworthy Arts and Crafts in Japan

Modern Arts

- *Manga*
(comic books)
- *Anime*
(animation)



(excerpt) *Scrolls of Frolicking Animals*, 12th and 13th century

Some Noteworthy Arts and Crafts in Japan

Modern Arts

- *Manga* (comic books)
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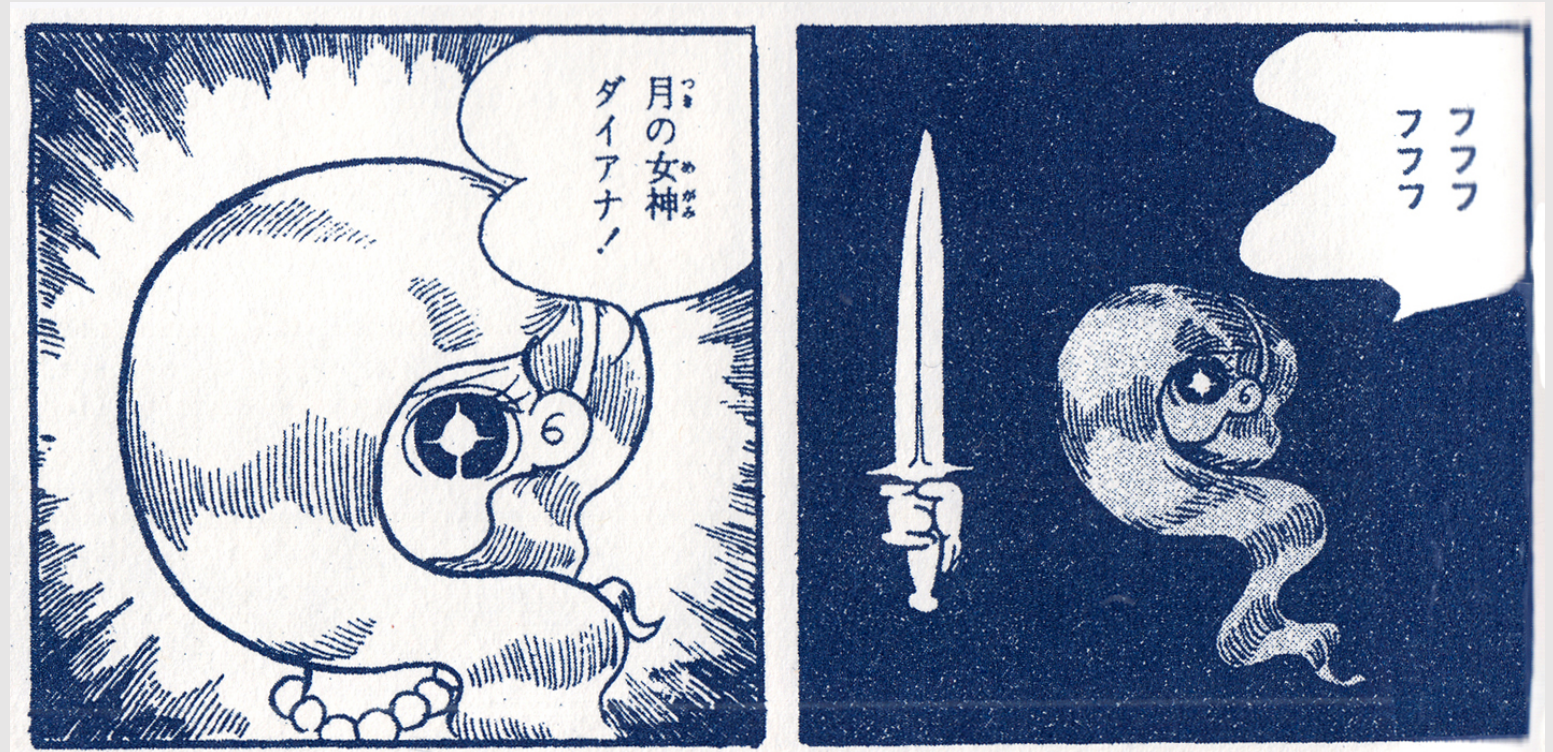


Hokusai, *Manga*, "Bathing People", Edo Period

Some Noteworthy Arts and Crafts in Japan

Modern Arts

- *Manga* (comic books)
- *Anime* (animation)



Leiji Matsumoto, *Midori no tenshi* (Green Angel), 1959

Some Noteworthy Arts and Crafts in Japan

Some Features often associated with traditional Japanese aesthetic sensibility:

although some of these are massive generalizations, and only apply to a narrow (but prominent) subset of Japanese aesthetic practices)

- Simplicity
- Asymmetry
- Naturalness
- Extreme care in detail
- Understated elegance
- Rusticity
- Imperfection
- Use of negative space and openness



Aesthetic Concepts in Japan

Wabi-Sabi (侘寂)

- Three Marks of Existence (Buddhism):
 - impermanence (無常, *mujō*);
 - suffering (苦, *ku*) and;
 - emptiness or absence of self-nature (空, *kū*).



Aesthetic Concepts in Japan

Wabi-Sabi (侘寂) **cont.**

- Other important and connected terms:
 - *Fukinsei* (不均齊): asymmetry, irregularity;
 - *Kanso* (簡素): simplicity;
 - *Koko* (考古): basic, weathered;
 - *Shizen* (自然): without pretense, natural;
 - *Yūgen* (幽玄): subtly profound grace, not obvious;
 - *Datsuzoku* (脱俗): unbounded by convention, free;
 - *Seijaku* (静寂): tranquility, silence.



Aesthetic Concepts in Japan

Key Concepts cont.

- *Miyabi* (雅)
 - Courtly elegance, refinement
- *Mono no aware* (物の哀れ, もののあはれ)
 - Awareness of the bittersweet transience of things, “the pathos of things”, “empathy for the object” and “sensitivity to ephemera”. wistfulness
- *Yūgen* (幽玄)
 - That which is suggestively beyond words, just beyond articulation (as in the evocations of poetry)
- *Ensō* (円相)
 - In Zen practice, Lit. ‘circle’. The absolute, emptiness, enlightenment, strength, the universe.
- *Kata*
 - The concept of ritual form in arts (e.g. tea ceremony) and martial arts (e.g. certain basic movements or sequences that must be performed)



Aesthetic Concepts in Japan

Key Concepts cont.

- *Jo-ha-kyū* (序破急)
 - Lit. "beginning, break, rapid." An approach to the style of movement, in which one starts slow, but then accelerates and ends abruptly. Used in several Japanese arts and music, including theatre, *Ensō*, certain forms of poetry, tea ceremony, kendo, etc.
- *Iki* (粋)
 - When applied to human action or character, something done with simplicity, sophistication, spontaneity, and originality, something
- *Shibui* (渋い)
 - Lit. 'sour' or 'astringent'. It has come to exemplify simple, subtle, and unobtrusive beauty.
- *Satori* (悟り)
 - Buddhist enlightenment, the first step towards becoming a buddha in the Zen tradition.
- *Kawaii* (可愛い) (modern)
 - Cuteness



Reading Yuriko Saito's "The Moral Dimension of Japanese Aesthetics"

“Japanese aesthetics suggests several ways for cultivating moral sensibilities. In what follows, I focus on two principles of design: (1) respecting the innate characteristics of objects and (2) honoring and responding to human needs.” (85)

Reading Yuriko Saito's "The Moral Dimension of Japanese Aesthetics"

Care for the object

Gardening: "...found in the oldest extant writing on garden design, *Sakuteiki* [*Book on Garden Making*], written by an eleventh-century aristocrat. The author states that the art of garden making consists of creating the scenic effect of a landscape by observing one principle of design: 'obeying (or following) the request' of an object (*kowan ni shitagau*)" (86)

Unlike topiary in European formal gardens, however, where shapes are imposed on the plant materials regardless of their own characteristics, a tree or a shrub in a Japanese garden is shaped according to its individual form." (86)

Reading Yuriko Saito's "The Moral Dimension of Japanese Aesthetics"

Ikebana: "...the literal translation of *ikebana*, or to 'let flower express itself' (*ikasu*). This can be achieved by further cutting of branches, leaves, and blossoms so that only the essential parts defining the particular plant can be clearly delineated. One contemporary commentator summarizes that 'the ultimate aim of floral art is to represent nature in its inmost essence'" (86)

Poetry: "According to Basho, the *raison d'être* of poetry is to capture the essence of nature by entering into and identifying oneself with it, summarized in his well-known saying: 'Of the pine-tree learn from the pine-tree. Of the bamboo learn from the bamboo.' For this, he calls for 'the slenderness of mind,' as one has to overcome one's personal feelings and concerns in order to grasp and appreciate the qualities of the objects for what they are. Sometimes described as 'impersonality,' the ideal of haiku making should be object centered, rather than subject governed" (86)

Reading Yuriko Saito's "The Moral Dimension of Japanese Aesthetics"

On painting: "Toward this end, the painter can and should omit certain elements, making the overall effect 'incomplete' and 'suggestive,' facilitating more readily the presentation of the essential characteristics of the subject matter, such as bird-ness" (86)

"If prerequisites for our moral life include understanding, appreciating, and respecting the other's reality, the capacity to experience and appreciate things on their own terms can contribute to applying this principle" (87)

Reading Yuriko Saito's "The Moral Dimension of Japanese Aesthetics"

Zen Master Dogen: "acting on and witnessing myriad things with the burden of oneself is 'delusion.' Acting on and witnessing oneself in the advent of myriad things is enlightenment." (quoted in Saito, 88)

"Unlike Immanuel Kant, who was skeptical about the possibility of experiencing a thing-in-itself (the noumenal world), Zen is optimistic about our ability to experience directly the thus-ness or being-suchness of the other (*immo*)" (88)

"Thus, the respectful attitude toward the object, material, or subject matter inherent in Japanese artists' and designers' practice, guided by the Buddhistic transcendence of ego, is not only an aesthetic strategy, but also a moral virtue that characterizes enlightenment." (88)

Reading Yuriko Saito's "The Moral Dimension of Japanese Aesthetics"

Care for the Other

“The communication of one’s caring attitude through aesthetic means also underlies the art of tea ceremony, usually credited with providing the model for civilized behavior and rules of etiquette that are still alive and well in Japan today” (89)

Tea ceremony: “This includes not only the obvious, such as preparing tea and snacks and choosing the tea bowl, but also such considerations as (1) when to refill water in the stone basin and sprinkle water on plants in the garden; (2) what implements and decorations to choose for providing a cool feeling in the summer and warmth in winter; (3) whether or not to brush off the snow accumulated on trees, rocks, and basins; and (4) how to leave water droplets on the kettle’s surface to allow for appreciation of the way they gradually dry over the hearth” (90)

Reading Yuriko Saito's "The Moral Dimension of Japanese Aesthetics"

Time, another aspect of consideration of the other: "Although material objects, whether garden, food, or packaging, are spatial entities, our experience of them necessarily takes time...Japanese gardens, the direction of visitors' movements is determined by the placement of stepping stones and bridges. Made with rocks of varying sizes, shapes, textures, and colors, stepping-stones are arranged in an irregular manner, making strolling at times awkward and inconvenient. Besides forcing us to slow down and savor each stone's characteristics, which we sense not only through our eyes but also with our soles, the irregular positioning of each stone controls both the direction and speed of our stroll, providing changing vistas and a varied pace." (90)

Reading Yuriko Saito's "The Moral Dimension of Japanese Aesthetics"

Gardens and temporal experience, profane/sacred: "Additionally, the strategy of miegakure, literally meaning "now you see it, now you don't," sometimes also referred to as "Zen view" by Western designers, intentionally blocks or partially obscures a scenic view or a tea hut by dense planting, giving us only hints and glimpses of what is to come" (90).

Reading Yuriko Saito's "The Moral Dimension of Japanese Aesthetics"

Food, linear and nonlinear: “if each dish were served in a Western ‘linear’ manner. Graham Parkes explains that ‘most of the meal is served at one time, rather than course by course as in the West. The advantage of this “nonlinear” way of eating is a remarkably wide range of tastes, as one gradually works one’s way through the various combinations of flavors afforded by a large number of small dishes laid out at the same time.’” (91)

Packaging, layers, sacred/profane: “Joy Hendry characterizes these ‘layers of wrapping’ as ‘a way of expressing care for the object inside, and therefore care for the recipient of the object.’” (91)

Reading Yuriko Saito's "The Moral Dimension of Japanese Aesthetics"

“From the Japanese aesthetic point of view, a person who rips apart a beautifully wrapped gift or gobbles up a Japanese lunchbox meal without savoring each ingredient is considered not only deficient in aesthetic sense and manner but also lacking in moral sensibility. In this sense, thoughtful design, such as in the Japanese gift package and food presentation, functions as a vehicle of communication” (92)

Reading Yuriko Saito's "The Moral Dimension of Japanese Aesthetics"

'Aesthetic welfare': "The aesthetic considerations in our lives are thus neither mere dispensable luxuries nor, to borrow Yrjo Sepänmaa's phrase, 'high cultural icing.' Nor are they confined to works of fine arts that tend to encourage or facilitate our disengagement from everyday life. Rather, promotion of and support for sensitively designed objects and environments is an indispensable ingredient of what Sepänmaa calls 'aesthetic welfare.' He points out that a true welfare state should guarantee not only 'health care, education, and housing,' but also "an experiential aspect of welfare. An aesthetic welfare state should offer a beautiful living environment and a rich cultural and art life' because they provide 'the basic conditions of life.'" (93)