AESTHETIC VALUES IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN: THE EFFECTS OF INDUSTRIALIZATION AND A CONSUMER ECONOMY ON JAPANESE AESTHETIC VALUES

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ANY ATTEMPT TO MAKE A DEFINITIVE STATEMENT REGARDING CONtemporary Japanese aesthetic values will necessarily contain flaws. Such a statement about Japan's aesthetic heritage can be relatively clear-cut, differing only in nuance with other opinions. However, the continuing and open-ended state of transformation which has encompassed Japan for over one hundred years and which is far less easy to define or assess, has had and is having an effect on the aesthetic values of the Japanese people. The end result of Japan's state of aesthetic flux can not be foretold; but past and present trends can be noted in the hope that they will provide indices of the overall direction of the process.

To a great extent Japan's aesthetic concepts were symbolized by the statement of Kenko: "In all things I yearn for the past."[1] The form the aesthetic values took when expressed, mattered relatively little. Whether in painting, sculpture, architecture, or the live arts, Japan's aesthetic heritage has been strongly tinged by both past continental influences and by Japan's "traditional" paucity of material wealth. The last one hundred years have served to alter the power of those influences in guiding Japan's aesthetic development. Western traditions, introduced in package form with early industrialization and modernization, have affixed themselves onto the structure of Japanese culture and have influenced its aesthetic facets in varying degrees in the different expressive forms.

To a considerable degree the core of Japanese aesthetics has retained its focus on the past. The purist forms of traditional culture — the "traditional" live arts, the martial arts, the tea ceremony, Ikebana, calligraphy, landscaping, and religious and certain categories of secular architecture — have all retained their traditional focus. To a certain, although lesser, extent this can also be said of literature and the plastic arts. However, a distinction must be made between this core and the deviations which surround it. The flower-less schools of Ikebana, or the "ungura gekijo" (underground theater), may well be fads destined to die rapid deaths as their novelty wears off; but the televised dramatic arts and the Western concept of flowery table centerpieces have apparently firmly ensconced themselves on the Japanese

[1] Donald Keene, trans., *Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenko* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 23.

aesthetic scene. For better or worse such attributes, and many others, of Westernized modern cultures are now parts of Japanese culture. The question remaining is one of degree: To what extent are the variant forms of aesthetic values achieving dominance over the traditional core?

I believe the best area to seek an answer to this query is within the totality of the contemporary Japanese life style. In looking at that life style I will concentrate upon the life style of Japan's urban population. The non-urban areas, while important, should not be focused upon for several reasons. The non-urban areas are too diffuse, too tied to local traditions, and too heterogeneous, and they look to the urban areas as the epitome of contemporary Japan. The life style of the urban complex is the pace setter of today's Japan. In determining the effect of today's Japanese life style upon Japanese aesthetic values, the home and its components provide excellent indices of trends. This is because the home, as the site of life's principal occurrences, is usually presented as representative of the possessors' desires. It often reflects the aesthetic image the occupant wishes to project.

Okakura Kakuzo wrote in *The Book of Tea* that:

> To a Japanese, accustomed to simplicity of ornamentation and frequent change of decorative method, a Western interior permanently filled with a vast array of pictures, statuary, and bric-a-brac gives the impression of mere vulgar display of riches.[2]

This concept of an ideal, akin to the literary concept of "sabi" — a carefully controlled, subdued taste with overtones of frugal rusticity — is still very much alive in Japan. However, it is confronted by other desires held by today's Japanese which are at variance with it. Idealization of simple, austere, and frugal aesthetic values, although in part philosophical, was in large part a matter of necessity. While the wealthy members of Japan's aristocracy could afford the luxury of looking back at idealized ancestors as being less tainted by vices because of the purity of their simple ways, the common people did so, partly because of emulative social pressures, but more so because their own simple, austere life style was economically unavoidable. While the masses very likely never strongly possessed the refined aesthetic sensibilities for which the Japanese are renowned, they conformed to those ideals and led an idealized life out of necessity. However, industrialization and its counterpart, a mass consumer economy, have drastically altered the situation. This type of economy with its attendant conspicuous consumption threatens the very heart of Japan's traditional aesthetic values.

Arnold Toynbee in his *Impressions of Japan* made a pertinent comment:

> In the past, when Japanese families had, on the average, more living-space than they have now, the whole of the space was at the disposal of the human inhabitants because they had few inanimate material possessions to compete

[2] Okakura Kakuzo, *The Book of Tea* (reprint of 1906 ed.; New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1964), p. 39.

> for the space with living human bodies. Nowadays, when a family's living-space is becoming more and more painfully cramped, its possessions are becoming more and more profuse. A family that cannot afford to buy more than a minimum of living-space, which is the dearest of all commodities on the Japanese market, is able to afford to buy the consumer goods — Western-style bedsteads and chests of drawers, pianofortes, transistors — that are now being produced in Japan at a relatively cheap price and in abundant quantities, thanks to the efficiency of Japanese industry. The increase in the amount of consumer-goods that is now being crammed into a Japanese home runs directly counter to the shrinkage of the amount of space that the goods and their human owners have to share between them. The combined effect of these two conflicting developments is literally to drive human beings to the wall.[3]

This manner of living is quite different from the idealizations of traditional Japan. Toynbee's impressions of Japan's developing life style reflect the conditions of Japan in 1967. Vogel, not quite a decade earlier, wrote[4] of a suburban life style which was more in line with traditional modes. The residents of Vogel's "Mamachi" possessed few objects of material wealth, had rather sparse furnishings, sought simple satisfaction from their miniature gardens, and perhaps set aside one of their rooms for Western-style objects. The Japanese life style Vogel described still remains, but it is being challenged and replaced by the phenomenon described by Toynbee. Very often the household garden of Japan, symbolizing Japanese desires to live in harmony with nature, has given way in whole or in part to a driveway and garage. In space-conscious Japan spatial priorities are vital. Thus even the open spaces surrounding neighborhood shrines and temples, formerly fulfilling the dual aesthetic function of a religious enclave in a mundane world and recreational open land, have not infrequently succumbed to the ever increasing demand for parking space.

One need only glance at the women's magazines of Japan and the developing trends will become apparent. Such magazines in Japan, as elsewhere, establish the normative aesthetic values of the housewives, who after all create the environment which will most greatly influence the succeeding generations of Japanese. The simple, the frugal, and the austere — all the idealized notions of traditional Japan — are still to be found between the covers of such magazines. However, those values are in the process of being compartmentalized and placed in one room of the home. Thus Vogel's representative Western room is being replaced by a representative Japanese room in an otherwise modern Western home. At the moment the process seems to be at about mid-point with examples of each present, but the trend is toward the latter. A product of contemporary Japan's prosperity and booming consumer economy, one finds numerous examples of articles describing and advertising homes and their attendant life style which, while

[3] Arnold Toynbee, *Impressions of Japan* (Tokyo: Kinseido Ltd. and Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 46.

[4] Ezra F. Vogel, *Japan's New Middle Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

vaguely Japanese to the outsider, are essentially modern, Western-style dwellings with one or two rooms designated as representative "wa shitsu" (Japanese rooms). Other common types of feature articles are those concerned with redecorating in Western style. Because of the dearth of space, much attention is paid to compartmentalization of daily functions within the Western format, the everything-in-its-proper-place school of thought, thereby eradicating much of the aesthetic spatial flexibility for which the Japanese are known.

One sure sign of the changes taking place in the Japanese life style has been the entrance of Japan's gigantic industrial combines into the field of producing and marketing the type of home I described above. For example Mitsui Fudosan has operated a well-attended "housing fair" in Tokyo in recent years. These residences, which will very likely help set the trends for developing Japanese modes of living and home-centered aesthetic values, uniformly contained only one or two "wa shitsu" and primarily had "yo shitsu" (Western rooms), often designated as "dainingu ki'chin," "ribingu ruru," or other such Anglicized Japanese terms. With the support of industrial giants, such as Mitsui, this life style will be firmly embedded in the Japanese cultural milieu.

Such changes are definitely occurring in Japan, but they are not evolving smoothly. Often the style of life which is developing appears to be that of a cluttered hodge-podge, frequently lacking both traditional aesthetic values and the aesthetic values which provide the *élan vital* of the life style of Western peoples. After being a "participant observer" in the cramped living quarters of most classes of Japanese society (often nearly glutted with a surfeit of material wealth), after riding the crowded public transportation and driving the crowded highways and surface streets of Japan's megalopolis, after daily seeing, breathing, and smelling the polluted by-products of Japan's industrial and commercial prosperity, one can only hope that the promise held out to the Japanese people by their leaders via the exhibits at Expo '70, will be brought to fruition.

The most striking feature of the life style projected for Japan in the Twenty-First Century is its high degree of compartmentalization. To a certain degree a compartmentalization of energies has been a prevalent characteristic of the Japanese throughout their history. Their selectivity in adapting and rejecting past foreign cultural intrusions, their internalized segregation of tensions, releasing the accumulated pressures in socially acceptable categorized dosages, and their language and thought patterns which mutually compartmentalize all their activities, have all been evident throughout their history. In the past the ability to compartmentalize inwardly and outwardly, has enabled the Japanese to suffice economically and surpass culturally within the harsh bounds placed by nature on her physical and material resources. In the past one hundred years, and particularly within the last ten to fifteen years, the Japanese have finally gained a measure of escape

from their natural handicaps. The price of that escape, an escape marked by great productivity and prosperity and equally great spatial and ecological pressures, has been the threat of the eradication of their traditional aesthetic ideals. Can the Japanese retain their ideal of man living in harmony with Nature, as they become increasingly engulfed in industrial swill? Only the future can answer that question definitely, but I believe they will be able to cope with the problems confronting industrial man to a degree other peoples will have difficulty in approaching. I base my opinion on two factors. The "natural" elements of Japan's physical setting have a markedly man-affected character. What is thought of as natural beauty in Japan often seems to an outside observer to be rather artificial in the sense that man has pruned and directed its development for hundreds of years. This factor of man being amenable to living in harmony with an "artificial" natural landscape, when combined with the factor of that same man's ability to compartmentalize his life style, will permit the Japanese to smoothly enter their Twenty-First Century. Man, in a nearly totally industrialized Japan for the next decades and beyond, may well be able to exist and enjoy life among the excesses of industrialism by compartmentalizing his energies. By channeling their aesthetic urges the Japanese can focus them on a small bit of whatever they conceive to be beauty. Just as increasingly the people of contemporary Japan live in a modernized pseudo-Western dwelling while making concessions to their ideals in the form of a "wa shitsu" or two, they will increasingly live in a massive industrial complex with concessions to the ideals of their agrarian past, in the form of segments of their cycle devoted to representations of those ideals.

In concluding this essay I would like to suggest that aesthetics itself in Japan is becoming compartmentalized. If present trends continue it seems likely that aesthetic values in Japan will become stratified into essentially two levels. At the "highest" and core level one finds the idealized aesthetic values carrying on the traditions of the past. At the very core one would find the ultra-conservative purists. This level of idealized aesthetic values will very likely continue to prevail, at least as a goal, among the wealthy who seek to continue or develop ties to the glories of Japan's past traditions. It will also probably prevail among the remaining rural Japanese who, because of their cultural conservatism and economic lag, will continue to live the traditions which their national ancestors idealized. The other level of aesthetic values would be that of the masses. The aesthetic values of the masses of an increasingly consumer-oriented Japanese economy will probably continue to pay homage to the idealized level in the form of the "wa shitsu" type compartmentalization, but essentially these values will become virtually commonly held with modern advanced cultures of the West. These values may very well be considered the lesser ones by the possessors of idealized values because of their foreignness. They may well be considered lesser values by outside observers as well, to whom they may appear

to be an imitative sub-variant of essentially Occidental values. Irregardless of such liabilities, this variant amalgam of aesthetic values, because of its compatibility with the emerging compartmentalization of Japan's life style, seems very likely to become the dominant type in an industrialized Japanese culture. Whether or not the next century is the "Japanese Century," a la Herman Kahn, these emerging values, compatible as they are with a hyper-industrialized culture, may well be the sources from which other peoples will learn to cope with their ambivalence when confronted by conflicting desires for material "progress" and maintenance of their traditions. In a world forced to confront, adjust to, and manage the excesses of the industrial and post-industrial ages, Japan's admittedly imperfect probable accommodations may well serve other peoples as an example.