

## **The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan**

Toshihiko and Toyo Izutsu

Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2014, PP. 167

Reviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

“[B]lissfulness lies beyond the reach of words.”<sup>1</sup>  
Gettan Sōkō (1326–1389)

This landmark work examines the aesthetic foundations of classical and medieval Japan. It demonstrates the profound and intimate relationship between philosophy, art and the sacred that permeates the whole of Japanese culture. Beauty mirrors the supernatural or metaphysical order and, for this reason, is central to religion and its civilizations. In fact, life without beauty was inconceivable in traditional societies and its absence was considered tantamount to repudiating the Spirit (an outlook that is utterly foreign to the desacralized climate of the modern West). This aesthetic experience of beauty as known in the traditional world is something foreign

---

<sup>1</sup> Gettan Sōkō, quoted in Toshihiko and Toyo Izutsu, *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan* (Springer, 1981), p. 123.

and rather unknown to the desacralized and anti-spiritual outlook of the modern Western mentality. This book reminds us how essential this dimension is for the psychological health and well-being of the human being and society at large and can function as a seed to revive integral aesthetics. Providing a salutary reminder of the indispensable role that beauty plays in preserving our psychological health and spiritual well-being is one of the distinctive achievements of *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan*.

This important study aims to provide a clear understanding of the “metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic experiences of the Japanese” (pp. ix–x). The Izutsus employ a method that traces phenomena back to their transpersonal source: “There is a peculiar kind of metaphysics, based on a realization of the simultaneous semantic articulation of consciousness and the external reality, dominating the whole functional domain of the Japanese sense of beauty” and, without an understanding of this sense, “the so-called ‘mystery’ of Japanese aesthetics would remain incomprehensible” (p. ix).

Essential Japanese artistic forms such as *haiku* and *waka* poetry, Noh plays, and the tea ceremony have given rise to the categories of *ushin* (depth of heart or intense feeling), *aware* (pathos or poignancy), *yūgen* (mysterious profundity) and *wabi* (subdued, austere beauty). However, as this work demonstrates, these notions require deep contemplation and do not lend themselves to superficial definitions.

The contemplative experience of the Japanese is “associative rather than logical, representational rather than linguistic, dimensional rather than linear, and non-temporal rather than successive” (p. 32). According to the traditional terminology, “Nothingness” (*mu*) is formless whereas “being” (*yū*) is the articulated aspect of existence. While Japanese arts are commonly spartan in their appearance, this should not be mistaken for lack of content or inspiration. On the contrary, this apparent emptiness conveys an unspeakable

dimension of Reality that reflects a multiplicity of meanings which serve to expand our appreciation of the aesthetic possibilities contained therein:

Thus Nature, actually envisaged by the poet, constitutes in itself a kind of Nature-‘field’ where the inner phenomenal activity of his Subjectivity finds its proper locus for externalisation. The Nature-‘field’ assumes the significance of an externalized form of his inner ‘field’ of contemplative Awareness, in which he is to encounter his own inner Self. (p. 22)

The Izutsus observe that “Nothingness [is] the non-articulated whole that is to be considered the sole Reality” (p. 31). This is to say, “Aesthetically, the supreme metaphysical value of Nothingness finds its own reflection as an aesthetic image in the representation of Nothingness” (p. 32). In this way, “a supreme metaphysical value is ascribed to Nothingness” (p. 31). Correspondingly, integral “aesthetics ... [is] based on a metaphysics having Nothingness as its ultimate goal” (p. 34). Therefore, the “being” that has emerged out of Nothingness is restored in the original Nothingness through the contemplative experience. “What is meant by this is that the subject, by completely identifying itself with its own articulating function, establishes itself as the Subject, i.e. the all-unifying consciousness comprising both the subject and object as ordinarily understood” (p. 30).

There is an inner dimension to our aesthetic experience that contains an “infinite possibility for growth and development” (p. 39). At a certain phase in its unfolding, the world of phenomena functions as a contemplative field, where the dialectic of subject and object or “being” (*yū*) and “Non-being” (*mu*) are reconciled in metaphysics:

The internal and the external, the subjective and the objective; the perceiver and the perceived, the field and the awareness of the field, the contained and the container: whichever of these pairs of opposing units we might posit as

the ultimate realms of articulation, we invariably witness primordial poles of reality, almost fused into one another, leaving, however, their faint traces of articulate boundaries, constituting between them a harmonious equilibrium.... Such is the whole reality and such is also the whole width of consciousness, and between the two is maintained a state of perfect equilibrium. (p. 41)

It is in this way that the following remark can be properly apprehended: “‘Being’ is in this way always expressed as ‘being’ immediately backed by ‘not-being’, while ‘not-being’ is expressed as ‘not-being’ pregnant and saturated with ‘being’” (p. 42).

This interplay contains the essence of Japanese aesthetics:

To the yearning seekers of blossoms  
With pride, would I offer  
A delight of the eye,  
The green from under the snow  
In a mountain village in springtide! (p. 50)

The distinct degrees of knowing correspond to levels of Reality that are discernable according to the mode of the knower:

When we observe through the filter of the teleological cognition inherent in our empirical consciousness the temporal aspect of the phenomenal world and the things and events that arise therein, we necessarily recognize numerous lines of causal relationship crossing each other between these things and events, each of them leaving behind it a trace of its own temporal development. Thus we obtain the image of reality in terms of the temporality of causal sequence. (p. 55)

Ultimate Reality transcends all verbal expressions and conceptual grasping as indicated by the following passage from a text of the Tendai school: “The inner state which is beyond the reach of all verbal expression, and in which there is no room for cogitation, and indeed which transcends all the activities of human mind.” (p. 112) This notion is also found in Zen Buddhism: “At dead of night, the

sun shines brilliantly in Shinra” (p. 43). In the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, “The sensible is Nothingness. Nothingness is the sensible” (p. 110) or, as we find in a celebrated Zen *kōan*, “All things that exist are reducible to One. To what is the One reducible? It is reducible to all things that exist” (p. 120).

Through our noetic faculty known as *buddhi* (Intellect) or *prajñā* (Wisdom), the transpersonal dimension of reality can be accessed directly. Accordingly, “Only after having probed the depth of one’s innate Mind-nature and attained the highest state of transcendental insight into it, could one possibly grasp this truth” (p. 127). When we undergo this transformation, there is a reintegration and abiding in the Absolute. Zen Buddhism conveys this understanding as follows: “Enlightenment after enlightenment, one finds oneself in the selfsame state as before enlightenment” (p. 124). Jitoku-Eki (d. 1083) once observed that “After the root of life has been eradicated, one is reborn variously in accordance with one’s intrinsic capacity” (p. 124). It is at this moment, having become what Rinzai Gigen (d. 866) described as a “true man without any rank” (p. 123), that we begin to understand the following Buddhist adage: “At no time are delusory thoughts to arise in the mind” (p. 22).

This illuminating analysis of classical and medieval Japanese aesthetics is full of insights that open a portal into the mysterious dimension of beauty in its metaphysical plenitude. Although largely dismissed by the secularized Western mindset, an integrated consideration of aesthetics is critical to a properly traditional understanding of beauty, which ought to infuse all domains of life. It is hoped that impressive works such as this can help awaken the Platonic *anamnesis* or ‘recollection’ of beauty as “the splendor of the true,” an insight that is confirmed in the sapiential doctrines of all humanity’s great spiritual traditions. Beauty mirrors the transpersonal order of Reality and allows us to become fully harmonized in our Spirit, soul and body. We conclude with Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694), arguably one of the greatest of all *haiku* poets,

who remarked: “The evolvement of heaven and earth is the seed of aesthetic creativity” (p. 166).