

# On Japanese Minimalism

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## Abstract

*Shibumi*, a Japanese term referring to a subtle elegance, but at times suggestive of austerity or even bitterness, captures a certain sense of restraint that is reflected in much traditional Japanese design. Although concepts derived from Japanese Zen Buddhism, such as *ma*, *wabi-sabi*, and *iki*, may be more commonly known to English-speaking audiences, this article proposes that *shibumi* is the more appropriate concept to apply when considering the minimalist nature inherent in much Japanese design. Moreover, this article suggests that *shibumi* and modernist design tastes may be compatible, despite past suggestions to the contrary. To support this viewpoint, I point to evidence in the ongoing design trends in Japanese design that continue to embrace several of the ideals of twentieth-century modernist design.

## Key Words

aesthetic appreciation; Naoto Fukasawa; Elizabeth Gordon; Japanese; Mingei; minimalism modernist design; Dieter Rams; *shibui*; *shibumi*; *wabi-sabi*; Soetsu Yanagi

## 1. Introduction

Although there are ongoing points of difference regarding the role of beauty in aesthetics, much of the work on aesthetics continues to address the nature of beauty, both in the natural and artifactual world.[1] Aesthetic experiences from a Japanese perspective are somewhat different from Western cultures in that they elevate both restraint and the transient as admirable qualities, and from these characteristics, a sense of beauty can

emerge.[2] Understatedness is a quality of much of the art and design of Japan, in an historical sense and in the modern era. This article discusses the underlying ideas from Japanese Zen Buddhism that drive a seemingly intuitive preference towards minimalist forms, a preference evident in traditional artifacts and also in contemporary art and design. I propose that the term '*shibumi*,' originally referring to gustatory bitterness or astringency, but now broadly referring to a subtle elegance, with an occasional sense of austerity, best encapsulates this preference. How this preference can be considered concerning modernist design, which often advocates a minimalist approach, is also discussed.

## 2. Traditional minimalism meets modernist design

In recent years, Japanese evangelists of lifestyle minimalism, such as Marie Kondo and Fumio Sasaki, have gained prominence among Western audiences.[3] They have taught us that having too much stuff in your home is a poor state of affairs. Unless an object is one for which you have a high level of affection ("sparking joy," as Kondo says), it is apparently of no value and ought to be discarded. Declutter your home, and you will declutter your thinking. If the popularity of recent books and television shows are any indication, the material minimalist perspective is increasingly being embraced by a significant number of people outside of Japan. Why is such minimalism advocated by these Japanese arbiters of taste? In this section, I examine two possibilities from the Japanese aesthetic tradition.

The Zen Buddhist concept of *ma*, usually translated as space, gap, or negative space, is often stated as the philosophical underpinning of what many in the West see as Japanese minimalism.[4] It is said that *ma* suggests an interval between the elements in environmental design, such as those in rock garden landscapes (*karesansui*, Figure 1).[5] Citing a poem by contemporary Japanese architect Arata Isozaki, Takahiko Iimura describes how *ma* works in the experience of a rock garden:

The garden can be regarded as both a medium and an environment—‘Perceive–Blankness,’ ‘Voice–Silence,’ ‘Void–Fill;’ employing pairs of contrasting concepts, Isozaki tried to juxtapose the negative and the positive. This is not an obliteration of the negative by the positive; on the contrary, it not only admits the existence of the negative space, but it also “fills into” the positive without turning the negative into the positive.[6]



Figure 1: Rock garden (karesansui) at Seiryu-den temple in Kyoto. Photograph by the author.

*Ma* brings a viewer’s attention to the spaces between objects as much as the objects themselves, affirming “the power and meaning of intervals and gaps in time, space, and being... [that] reveal a rich reality of presence and place.”[7] It serves environmental design in several ways conducive to a minimalist aesthetic: “the importance of openings, bridging spaces, form defining space rather than space serving form, simplicity, asymmetry, flowing/ changing forms, and so forth.”[8] Beyond rock gardens, there are instances in Japanese art and design broadly where this concept of negative space may be applicable, such as painting or calligraphy or perhaps, more recently, in the arrangement of graphical elements, as shown in Figure 2.[9]

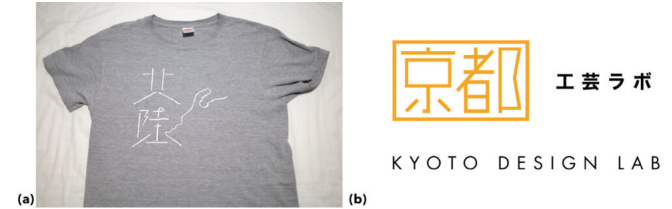


Figure 2: Much contemporary Japanese graphic design has a tendency to use ample negative space and wide letter-spacing. (a) Tee-shirt design of Kanji saying “Hokuriku” (a region in northwest Japan), with a simple map of the coastline. Design by Daijiro Ohara. Photograph by the author. (b) The orange Kanji characters in the top left (saying “Kyoto”) are stretched to accentuate the spaces within. Original prototype by the author.

But the view of *ma* does not convincingly account for why so many, though certainly not all, Japanese design artifacts, from traditional lacquerware soup bowls and ceramic teacups (*yunomi*, Figure 3) to modern robots like Honda’s ASIMO and products from design company Muji, like Naoto Fukasawa’s CD player (Figure 4), exhibit minimalist tendencies.[10] Taken as solitary standalone objects, these examples all exhibit a certain refinement or subtlety through a minimalism that does not necessarily rely on the negative space commonly associated with *ma*. Fukasawa’s CD player, for example, when presented on an empty wall of negative space as in Figure 4, could be considered an example of *ma*. But the concept of *ma* does not explain why Fukasawa chose a light gray exterior, with a simple form and few buttons that offer only the most basic functionality for his design object.



Figure 3: A simple Japanese ceramic teacup, referred to as yunomi. Photograph by the author.



Figure 4: An example of Japanese modernist design minimalism: Naoto Fukasawa's wall-mounted CD player, first released in 1999, designed for the Japanese design company Muji. Photograph by the author.

Another set of concepts in Japanese aesthetics that may account for minimalism in Japanese design is *wabi-sabi*. *Wabi-sabi* is considered a prominent aspect of Zen Buddhist aesthetics.[11] Beginning around the sixteenth-century as a reaction against more ostentatious Chinese artforms of the time, *wabi-sabi* is derived from Zen Buddhist thinking as a focus on

simplicity and an acceptance of imperfection.[12] The term consists of two separate words: *wabi*, referring to rustic simplicity and austerity, and *sabi*, which suggests rust, an antique look, but can also imply loneliness.[13] As a combination, the term *wabi-sabi* embraces the handmade and rustic, accepting decay and impermanence as natural processes that should be celebrated rather than fought against, a trait that makes it something of an antithesis to modernism and consumer culture.[14]

Although there has been debate as to how many of Japan's arts are historically a result of Zen thought, *wabi-sabi* continues to influence design in the modern world.[15] Its influence has been noted in the work of fashion designers such as Issey Miyake and Rei Kawakubo.[16] Miyake's works, for example, often feature a rough and rugged appearance and the use of organic shapes and asymmetrical designs. Architects Tadao Ando and Kengo Kuma have also acknowledged *wabi-sabi* in their works. Ando named one of his works "Wabi house," while Kuma blends traditional, raw materials, such as bamboo as a structural element, with modern materials, calling his approach a "new kind of *wabi-sabi*." [17]

However, one complication of *wabi-sabi* visual aesthetics is that an intuitive awareness may only be acquired after a significant amount of effort is devoted to them, the results of which are highly refined objects of the art world. Such an awareness does not necessarily apply in appreciating the beauty of everyday designed objects. The objects of modernist design are also part of our everyday lives and generally not those associated with artistic activities. Yuriko Saito has made this observation:

I am somewhat skeptical about the *wabi* aesthetic mentality's efficacy in facilitating the acceptance and celebration of human predicament. The reason is this. I believe that cultivation of this aesthetic sensibility is certainly possible and has been accomplished by a number of people who derive aesthetic pleasure from the tea ceremony implements, tea huts, meagre food served there, poems with desolate tone, and the like.

However, these items are all experienced within the sphere of artistic activities, not as part of our everyday life.[18]

There is also a paradox in considering several objects, such as those of the tea ceremony or lacquerware, as representative of the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic, when these examples are highly refined to the point of near-perfection.[19] *Wabi-sabi* aesthetics are said to promote imperfection, decay, and a rustic nature, often through the creation of handmade artifacts that use natural materials. While these rustic, imperfect aesthetics may be a welcome respite in a world of machine-made artefacts, *wabi-sabi* alone does not account for why so many modernist design objects in Japan are minimalist in nature. Modernist design objects are also highly refined to the point of near-perfection, yet feature no signs of the rust or decay inherent in the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic. Neither are these design objects within the sphere of artistic activities noted above by Saito, as they are everyday objects that feature in the homes of millions of people in Japan and abroad.[20] *Wabi-sabi*, as expressed through the high-end, refined artforms of the Japanese tea ceremony, is essentially an aesthetic of *transience*. [21]

### 3. *Shibumi* and modernism

A sense of subtle elegance is captured in the Japanese word *shibui* (adjective) or *shibumi* (noun), terms usually translated as elegant, austere, refined, and simple, but also bitter and astringent.[22] In many instances *shibumi* suggests a quiet sense of taste and can apply to food and drink in addition to design and art. It is my view that *shibumi* is likely related to the *sabi* portion in the term *wabi-sabi*, as *sabi* can refer to “elegant simplicity.” [23] Usage of the term can be traced back to the Muromachi period (1333–1568), with an unripe persimmon considered a classic example of the quality in this period.[24] Japan scholar Donald Richie (1924–2013) noted that modern-day usage of the term implied “the use of subdued colors, simple patterns, singers with unostentatious deliveries, actors who blended with the ensemble,” and recounted an

anecdote where a stranger in Japan complimented his muted dark brown-green tie as being *shibui*. [25] A somewhat related concept, *iki*, has also gained some prominence in the English-speaking world. *Iki* is often used to suggest something analogous to *chic*, stylish or elegant. [26] While some objects may exhibit qualities of both *iki* and *shibumi*, the latter implies something more subtle and humble, and not necessarily fashionable or stylish. [27] Knowing that there is a subtle elegance to be found in the subduedness of *shibumi* was initially seen as a sense of sophistication, in contrast to more colorful, showy items that were more easily appreciated by the masses. Although this may also imply a sense of elite tastes, the term usually applies to everyday objects and is a part of the general lexicon. [28]

An internet image search of the terms ‘*shibui*’ or ‘*shibumi*,’ and ‘design’ or ‘products’ in Japanese, will bring up an enormous range of design artifacts: smartwatches and smart-phone covers, clothing, wallets and bags, electric guitars, bicycles and motorcycles, and shelving units. These search results consist primarily of contemporary objects, surprisingly few that could be considered objects of traditional Japanese culture. The modernist design work of Japanese designers Naoto Fukasawa (Figure 4, above), Hiroshi Seki, and Yohei Kuwano (Figure 5, below), including electronics and furniture, has also been described as *shibumi*, as has modernist architecture of the post-war period. [29] Research also suggests that the term can be applied to everyday contemporary Western fashion, such as denim jeans. [30] It is fair to say that many of these design artefacts would be considered contemporary rather than traditional design objects of Japan. This result suggests that *shibumi* can apply equally to objects both old and new, the high-end and practical everyday objects of both Japan and other countries, and that a Japanese sense of minimalism is as relevant to contemporary design as it has been to designs of the past. [31] It is worth noting, however, that there is a lack of evidence of designers showing clear intention to create a *shibumi* experience, but it is the users of design artefacts that point to the *shibumi* qualities. [32]



Figure 5: Kitchen timer released by Muji, designed by Hiroshi Seki and Yohei Kuwano. The functionality offered is minimal: Start/Stop and Reset are buttons, and time is adjusted by rotating the outer dial. Photograph by the author.

Soetsu Yanagi (1889–1961), the founder of the Japanese *Mingei* (folk crafts) movement (1923–present day), suggests that the sense of *shibumi* explains a uniquely Japanese approach to beauty:

I still think that there is probably no country like Japan whose people live in surroundings composed of specially chosen objects. Behind it all is undoubtedly some sort of educated taste or standard of beauty. Of course, some aspects may be shallow or mistaken, but in any case, things are chosen according to some standard. This may be something as simple as *shibui* or *shibumi* (simple, subtle, and unobtrusive beauty), a concept which has permeated all levels of Japanese society. It is hard to tell to what extent this simple word has safely guided the Japanese people to the heights and depths of beauty.[33]

Yanagi contends that the aesthetic understanding of *shibumi* permeates all levels of society and timelessly guides the tastes of Japanese people, regardless of the fashions of the day:

Even people of the flashiest sort know in the back of their mind that *shibumi* is a class above them... It contains something that resides outside of time, a truth that is always new and fresh. It harbours a deep Zen significance.[34]

Putting Yanagi's arguments about the universality of Japanese people's aesthetic judgments aside, the *shibumi* aesthetic tends to be associated with older designs, for example, Figure 3, above.[35] Yanagi considers *shibumi*, like *wabi-sabi*, to be an awareness of the Zen Buddhist concept of *muji*, meaning "no ground," referring to something that is "plain, solid-colored, and un-patterned," yet comes from "the highest level sensibility." [36] Beyond simply an appreciation of the visual characteristics noted by Ritchie, this awareness is "an expression of the limitless existence (*yu*) that is encompassed by the void of *mu*." [37] This void is why Japanese philosophy rooted in Zen is occasionally referred to as a "philosophy of nothingness." [38] Zen claims that all things arise from this nothingness, including, potentially, the God whom Abrahamic religions credit for creating everything in the universe:

*Sūnyata* [a Sanskrit term] or nothingness in Zen is not a "nothing" out of which all things were created by God, but a "nothing" from which God himself [also] emerged. According to Zen, we are not creatures of God, but manifestations of emptiness... Although this groundlessness is deep enough to include even God, it is by no means something objectively observable.[39]

That we all arise from the same nothingness as all other things requires a certain amount of humility on our part, according to Yanagi: "Before we begin to express our thoughts, we first have to listen to what the object has to say. In our appreciation and awareness of beauty, we must first of all rein in our tongue." [40] Although the majority of modern Japanese people may not be openly practicing Zen Buddhists, the remnants of this restraining influence in both Japanese culture and many of the objects it



produces remain strong in the current age.[41]

Whether *shibumi* can be a relevant aesthetic response to modern objects may be a somewhat controversial view. Elizabeth Gordon (1906–2000) was the editor of *House Beautiful* magazine for more than twenty years and a friend and colleague of the architect Frank Lloyd-Wright (1867–1959). Gordon was among the first to introduce the concept of *shibumi* to an English-speaking audience.[42] She was emphatic that the *shibumi* aesthetic could not apply to objects of the modern age (1960):

Very few modern things can be said to be *shibui*. Modern design is too new a point of view to have developed the depths necessary for *shibusu*. Anyway, the modern movement has put too high a value on the machine-made look. *Shibusu* is humanistic and naturalistic, and the opposite of mechanistic. For this reason, it has nothing whatever to do with the “less is more” thinking of *Bauhaus* and “The International Style.” *Shibusu* is organic simplicity producing richness. It is not denial and austerity, for it is developed to the hilt.[43]

In my view, time has shown that Japanese *shibumi* tastes are, in fact, compatible with modernist design, and one could argue that in the decades preceding and following Gordon’s above statement, modernist design did produce works of great depth.

Japan quickly embraced the modernist movement early after its inception. Concepts from the *Bauhaus* (1919–1933), a German art school that trained students in architecture, product design, graphic design, and photography were enormously popular in Japan from the 1930s onward. The *Bauhaus* explicitly embraced the industrial aesthetics of the machine, as did the modernist product designers who followed in its wake.[44] Takehiko Mizutani (1898–1969) was one of the first Japanese students of the *Bauhaus* and went on to become a professor at the Tokyo University of the Arts.[45] The spread of *Bauhaus* ideas was also aided by Michiko Yamawaki (1910–2000) and Iwao Yamawaki (1898–1987), a Japanese couple who studied for

two years at the *Bauhaus* school in Dessau before its closure.[46] On their return to Japan, Iwao designed several buildings in the *Bauhaus* style, in Tokyo and Kamakura, created propaganda for the Japanese government in the lead-up to the Second World War, and both Yamawakis, along with Mizutani and others, hosted exhibitions of *Bauhaus* work after the war.[47] Yūsaku Kamekura (1915–1997), who designed the logo and other branding for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, was also influenced by the *Bauhaus*’ work in graphic design.[48] In more recent years, the Japanese design company Muji even hosted a *Bauhaus* exhibition at its Ginza store in Tokyo, where it boldly exhibited its products directly alongside *Bauhaus* works.[49]

Renowned German product designer Dieter Rams is known to be influenced by Japanese minimalist aesthetics—to the extent that he cultivated a Japanese garden in his home and hosted a commemorative exhibition of his work at Kenninji Temple in Kyoto.[50] Rams, in turn, was highly influential on Japanese product designers, such as Naoto Fukasawa, who acknowledged Rams’ influence on his work.[51] It is worth observing that two of Rams’ design rules are particularly relevant to the aesthetics of *shibumi*:

Good design is aesthetic: The aesthetic quality of a product is integral to its usefulness because products we use every day affect our person and our well-being. But only well-executed objects can be beautiful. Good design is unobtrusive: Products fulfilling a purpose are like tools. They are neither decorative objects nor works of art. Their design should, therefore, be both neutral and restrained, to leave room for the user’s self-expression.[52]

The restrained works of Rams, and those that followed, such as Fukasawa and Jonathan Ive, formerly the principal product designer at Apple, a company co-founded by Steve Jobs— another Westerner highly influenced by Zen Buddhism—can arguably be considered works of both richness and subtlety on a level comparable to older artefacts described as *shibumi*.

[53] Rams' design rules are also highly in tune with Yanagi's view of making beautiful things that are made to be used, but while removing anything superfluous.[54]

Austerity, as implied through the term *shibumi*, in aesthetic choices may at first suggest a tip in the balance between form and function firmly in favor of function, and this continues to be an assumption that many modernist designers work with.[55] From a design standpoint, austere aesthetics may imply that emphasis can be placed on functionality, thereby making a designed object more usable, but it is not always that simple; removing features solely for perceived simplicity may reduce the functionality of a designed object.[56] Finding beauty within an object's form can also promote usability, but the reverse can also be true; perceived usability can also make an object's form appear more beautiful. These two contrasting views on the roles of beauty and usability are an ongoing debate within the field of interaction design.[57] Therefore, a turn towards the austerity of *shibumi*, while somewhat implying a preference for function over form, is primarily an aesthetic choice on the part of both the designer and the user (where they have a choice, that is), and not one necessarily driven by the desire of a designer to improve usability.[58] Creating simple forms in contemporary design requires a strategic "thoughtful reduction" of functionality to ensure that adequate amounts of utility still remain.[59] By engaging with a product's users, a designer can methodically undertake this reduction of functionality. Technologist John Maeda states:

On the one hand, you want a product or service to be easy to use; on the other hand you want it to do everything that a person might want it to do. The process of reaching an ideal state of simplicity can be truly complex, so allow me to simplify it for you. The simplest way to achieve simplicity is through thoughtful reduction. When in doubt, just remove. But be careful of what you remove.[60]

Yanagi proposed that the everyday objects of craftspeople should be

utilitarian and since they undertake everyday tasks, these objects should be humble in appearance. Although Maeda and Yanagi describe the reason for simple forms from different perspectives, both of these views support a minimalist tendency that still acknowledges the necessity of functionality. Yanagi states:

The world of utility and the world of beauty are not separate realms. Who is to say that spirit and matter are not one? Since these utilitarian objects have a commonplace task to perform, they are dressed, so to speak, in modest wear and lead quiet lives... They work thoughtlessly and unselfishly, carrying out effortlessly and inconspicuously whatever duty comes their way. They possess a genuine, unmovable beauty.[61]

It is the humility of the objects that Yanagi describes that appears to differentiate the subtle elegance suggested in the term *shibumi*, and this humility is not necessarily considered from the perspective of Maeda's method of thoughtful reduction, which is careful not to remove fundamental functionality. Yet the two approaches have both resulted in the promotion of restrained, minimalistic forms that acknowledge their everyday purpose.

#### 4. An enduring minimalism

That Japan embraced modernist design so readily in the post-war period of industrialization suggests that there is a degree of flexibility within *shibumi* tastes and they are consequently compatible with the so-called aesthetics of the machine. It is also worth noting that often valid criticisms of modernist product design and architecture being impersonal, colorless, and sterile may also resonate with the mild sense of bitterness that the term *shibumi* can sometimes evoke: a bitterness or astringency that may be viewed in a positive light, even as a sign of elegance.[62] For example, what may be considered a lack of color or ornamentation from a critic of Rams' style may be considered a positive trait from the perspective of *shibumi*, where subdued colors and simple forms are viewed favorably.

[63] Nevertheless, it is not my intention to imply that Japan necessarily wholeheartedly embraced the Bauhaus-derived International Style or modernism that Gordon and Lloyd-Wright were so wary of.[64] While Japan has embraced certain aspects of modernist styles in architecture, graphic design, and product design, it has resisted the full forces of globalization by maintaining subtle references to Japanese culture.[65] This is apparent in the work of furniture designer Sori Yanagi (1915–2011; son of Soetsu Yanagi), as it is in the products of Muji, and also the architecture of Tadao Ando and Kengo Kuma, all of whom incorporate traditional forms and objects into their contemporary designs.[66]

Yanagi (Soetsu), writing almost a century before many of the innovations of today, may have foreseen that a future of design may be found in a modernist aesthetic that accounted for *shibumi* tastes:

Since [*shibumi*] is not a fabricated beauty, it is not lost in the comings and goings of ephemeral fads. The Japanese sense of beauty is bolstered by a profound backdrop, something not to be found in the West. Without doubt, it will contribute to new cultural developments in the future, for it has the power to augment the failings of Western culture. [67]

Although Yanagi does not articulate here what exactly he means by the failings of Western culture, the profound backdrop he mentions seems to be the tastes Japanese people derive from Zen Buddhist aesthetics.[68] It is my view that both a traditional sense of *shibumi* as Yanagi has described and the minimalist nature of much modernist design have resulted in the tastes we see expressed in contemporary Japanese minimalist design. It may be that the Zen origins of *shibumi* tastes broadly give Japanese modernist design a greater sense of subtle elegance, when compared to more colorful, even ostentatious forms from both Japan and abroad, because it reflects the older religious-based attitudes of Japanese culture. [69]

## 5. Concluding remarks

This article discussed several concepts from Japanese Zen Buddhism that have gained attention in the English-speaking world: *ma*, *wabi-sabi*, *iki*, and *shibumi*. I explained my view that, of these, it is *shibumi* that may account for much of what we can consider to be Japanese design minimalism.[70] *Ma* seems mainly applicable to environments, where the spaces between objects are as important as the objects themselves, while *wabi-sabi* may account for a Japanese sense of temporality through imperfection. *Shibumi* also lacks the connotations of chicness inherent in the quality of *iki*. *Shibumi* may be an expression of the *sabi* part of *wabi-sabi*, which can imply a simple elegance but without the connotations of rust or antiquity that *sabi* can otherwise suggest. Although Gordon was adamant that a *shibumi* aesthetic could not apply to the modernist design of the twentieth century, I argued against this viewpoint by providing several examples of where modern items from Japan and abroad have been described as *shibumi* by users in Japan. The positive attitude towards austerity sometimes implied by *shibumi* also means that the criticism of modernist design's coldness or sterility may not be felt so strongly among the tastes of Japanese designers and their products' users.

While a Japanese appreciation of *shibumi* may not solely explain the phenomenon of minimalism in much contemporary Japanese design, the firm embrace of twentieth-century modernist design principles suggests that its sparse forms did, indeed, resonate with several of Japan's more prominent designers and many of Japan's consumers. I believe this embrace of modernist minimalism aligns with Yanagi's somewhat contentious view that the intuitive *shibumi* tastes within Japanese culture are beyond short-term fads, as modernist design has now existed and often thrived in Japan for the best part of a century. The minimalist objects of modernist design described here capture the same *shibumi* aesthetics Ritchie and Yanagi both note that the term encapsulates. Personally, I can see the subdued colors, simple patterns, and modesty of *shibumi* in the



works of Rams, Fukasawa, Seki, and Kuwano. Aside from advances in technology that came about during the twentieth century, the main point of difference lies between the designers rather than the objects themselves. These modernist designers, from Japan and abroad, did seek recognition of their work, while the designers of *Mingei*, who Yanagi was enamored by, wished to remain anonymous— although curiously, the company Muji, for whom Fukasawa, Seki and Kuwano all created designs, describe their overall design ethos as “anonymous.”[71] Nevertheless, my view is that the resultant modernist design objects and the *shibumi* aesthetics encouraged by Yanagi are highly compatible; modernist design favors form after function, while *shibumi* aesthetics promotes useful objects with subdued and even austere forms. Stripping back features until an object is down to its simplest form, as implied by Rams’ and Maeda’s principles, has answered Yanagi’s Zen-inspired call to produce objects of humility, perhaps unintentionally in some instances. More specifically, the constraints apparent in much modernist design may be somewhat conducive to producing minimalist objects that, in turn, may warrant a *shibumi* response from those raised in Japanese culture who interact with them.

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### Endnotes

[1] Nick Zangwill discusses the place of beauty among other aesthetic properties in the philosophy of aesthetics, in addition to various types and aspects of beauty: Nick Zangwill, “Beauty,” in *Oxford Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 325-343.

[2] The Japanese word for aesthetics (*bigaku*) tends to imply the Western approach to the study (*gaku*) of beauty (*bi*), dating back to the philosophy of ancient Greece, and it is for this reason that some Japanese scholars prefer the use of the term ‘beauty’ to the term ‘aesthetics.’ (See Kurosu in Tractisinsky.) Notwithstanding, as beauty is still one of the principal concerns within studies in aesthetics, and this article is intended for an English-speaking audience, I continue to use ‘aesthetics’ as the term throughout this article. See Kurosu (19.12 Commentary by Masaaki Kurosu), “Visual Aesthetics,” *The Encyclopedia of Human-Computer Interaction*, 2nd Ed, <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/book/the-encyclopedia-of-human-computer-interaction-2nd-ed/visual-aesthetics>, accessed April 20, 2020.

[3] Kondo’s most well-known book is likely *Spark Joy: An Illustrated Guide to the Japanese Art of Tidying* (New York: Ten Speed Press, 2016). Sasaki’s only book to date is *Goodbye, Things: On Minimalist Living* (London: Penguin UK, 2017).

[4] An overview of the concept of *ma* as it relates to Japanese gardens is in Takahiko Iimura, "A Note for MA: Space/Time in the Garden of Ryoan-Ji," *Millennium Film Journal*, 38, 2 (2002), <http://www.mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ38/iimura.html>.

[5] Japan's rock gardens bear a strong resemblance to Chinese gardens that were popular among the Sung dynasty's aristocracy and were only associated with Zen Buddhism from the 1930s. See Robert Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," *History of Religions*, 33, 1 (1993), 1-43; ref. on 32.

[6] Iimura, "A Note for MA," para. 19.

[7] Richard Pilgrim, "Intervals (Ma) in Space and Time: Foundations for a Religio-Aesthetic Paradigm in Japan," in *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives*, ed., Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Steven Heine (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 55-80; ref. on p. 75.

[8] *Ibid*, p. 61.

[9] *Ibid*, p. 60. While use of negative space in a logo may not be unique to contemporary Japanese graphic design, the use of large amounts of negative space has been embraced by many Japanese graphic designers.

[10] Paul Haimes, "Zen and the Art of Website Maintenance," *Interactions*, 23, 1 (2015), 20-21. Honda's ASIMO robot: "ASIMO by Honda," American Honda Motor Co. Inc., accessed May 15, 2020, <https://asimo.honda.com/>. Naoto Fukasawa's CD player: "Wall mounted CD Player," Naoto Fukasawa Design, <https://naotofukasawa.com/projects/540>, accessed May 15, 2020.

[11] This is not to insinuate that seemingly Zen-derived aesthetics convincingly explain everything about Japanese tastes, nor that all Japanese share the same tastes. I say, "seemingly," because some researchers state that the Zen appropriation of all prominent art forms in

Japan is highly dubious, e.g., Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," p. 35.

[12] Yuriko Saito, "The Japanese Aesthetics of Imperfection and Insufficiency," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 55, 4 (1997), 377-85. The word *wabi* is often translated as "simple and quiet" or "rustic simplicity": "Wabi," Jisho.org, <https://jisho.org/search/wabi>, accessed May 15, 2020. *Sabi* is often translated as "antique" and "elegant simplicity." It can also mean "lonely" or "solitary:" "Sabi," Jisho.org, <https://jisho.org/search/sabi>, accessed May 15, 2020.

[13] See the definitions in note 12.

[14] William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement in England also advocated handmade objects, which they considered superior to machine-made objects. See William Morris and Gillian Naylor, *William Morris by Himself: Designs and Writings* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), pp. 153-154.

[15] See Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism."

[16] Bonnie English, *Japanese Fashion Designers: The Work and Influence of Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo* (Oxford: Berg, 2013), p. 131.

[17] "Wabi House / Tadao Ando Architect and Associates," ArchDaily, May 30, 2016, <https://www.archdaily.com/788480/wabi-house-tadao-ando-architect-and-associates>. Kuma is discussed in Dana Buntrock, *Materials and Meaning in Contemporary Japanese Architecture: Tradition and Today* (Oxon: Routledge, 2010), p. 65.

[18] Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 198.

[19] *Ibid*, p. 171.

[20] As an example, Muji's products, often described as minimalist, are popular in Japan and throughout the world: "Corporate Report 2019," *Ryohin Keikaku*, May 21, 2019, [https://ryohin-keikaku.jp/corporate/pdf/2019\\_en.pdf](https://ryohin-keikaku.jp/corporate/pdf/2019_en.pdf).

[21] Roger Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 95.

[22] A definition of *shibui* (verb) is at "Shibui," Jisho.org, accessed May 15, 2020, <https://jisho.org/search/shibui>. A definition of *shibumi* (noun) is at "Shibumi," Jisho.org, accessed May 15, 2020, <https://jisho.org/search/shibumi>. For the purpose of the article, the two can be used interchangeably.

[23] See note 12, point 2, in the second set of definitions at "Sabi," Jisho.org.

[24] Donald Richie, *A Tractate on Japanese Aesthetics* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2007), p. 40.

[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

[26] Shuzo Kuki and Sakuko Matsui, *Reflections on Japanese Taste: The Structure of Iki* (Sydney: Power Publications, 1997), p. 58.

[27] Takeshi Tanahashi, "Modern Fashion and Japanese 'Iki' [in Japanese]," *Bulletin of Nara Sangyo University*, 23, 12 (2007), 19-27.

[28] Richie, *A Tractate on Japanese Aesthetics*, p. 40.

[29] Various web blogs and product reviews in Japanese use the word *shibumi* to explain contemporary design products, for example, the calculator designed by Fukasawa on this page: "Fukasawa Naoto Design [in Japanese]," Kosuke Kato Planning & Designing Office, July 7, 2008, <https://ex-tra.jp/kosukekato/archives/2749>. The kitchen timer of Seki

and Kuwano is also described as *shibumi*, particularly in reference to its color, for example: "Recommended products to buy during Muji Sales [in Japanese]," Spoon Home, March 13, 2019, <https://www.spoonhome.com/muji-saleweek-recoitem/>. The buildings on this page, all from the post-war period, are also described as *shibumi*: "Discovering 'shibui' buildings on daily walks [in Japanese]," Nakasha for the Future, <https://www.nakasha.co.jp/future/report/shibubiru.html>, accessed May 15, 2020.

[30] Tanahashi, "Modern Fashion and Japanese 'Iki'" [in Japanese].

[31] *Ibid.* Tanahashi suggests the term *dassai-kakkoi* applies to *shibumi* objects, implying that they are "unsophisticated cool."

[32] Design as an interplay between the intentions of the designer and the expectations, experiences, and aspirations of users is discussed in John Heskett, *Toothpicks and Logos: Design in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 54.

[33] Soetsu Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things* (London: Penguin Random House, 2019), p. 156. Yanagi was the principal founder of the Japanese Mingei movement, which centered on everyday, handmade folk crafts made by anonymous craftspeople.

[34] *Ibid.*, pp. 156-157.

[35] Whether judgments of taste are objective or subjective is a topic of ongoing debate: Nick Zangwill, "Aesthetic Judgment," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aesthetic-judgment/>, accessed May 10, 2020. Yanagi has also been criticized for nationalist tendencies that often present a homogenized image of Japanese people and their characteristics, especially in: Yuko Kikuchi, *Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory: Cultural Nationalism and Oriental Orientalism* (London: Routledge Curzon,

2004), p. 96, p. 124.

[36] This *muji* has a different meaning (no ground) to the Muji (no brand) company. See: Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, p. 159; "What is MUJI?," muji.com, <https://www.muji.com/au/about>, accessed August 5, 2020.

[37] *Ibid.*, pp. 159–160.

[38] The idea of the "void" in Japanese philosophy is a topic best explored elsewhere. A starting point could be James Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001).

[39] Masao Abe and Steven Heine, *Zen and Comparative Studies: Part Two of a Two-Volume Sequel to Zen and Western Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), pp. 63-64.

[40] Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, p. 282.

[41] The number of practicing Buddhists in Japan is declining: Justin McCurry, "Zen No More: Japan Shuns Its Buddhist Traditions as Temples Close," *The Guardian*, November 6, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/06/zen-no-more-japan-shuns-its-buddhist-traditions-as-temples-close>.

[42] Julie Iovine, "Elizabeth Gordon, 94, Dies; Was House Beautiful Editor," *New York Times*, September 17 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/09/17/nyregion/elizabeth-gordon-94-dies-was-house-beautiful-editor.html>.

[43] Quoted in Monica Penick, *Tastemaker: Elizabeth Gordon, House Beautiful, and the Postwar American Home* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), pp. 201-202. The terms *shibusu* and *shibumi* are both nouns, so for the discussion here it does not matter which term is used.

[44] The industrial, machine-based aesthetics of the *Bauhaus* are noted in Eva Forgacs, *The Bauhaus Idea and Bauhaus Politics* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1995), p. 105.

[45] Petra Ruick, "Takehiko Mizutani's Years at The Bauhaus Dessau," *Journal of Architecture and Planning (Transactions of AIA)*, 1, 599 (2006), 157-63.

[46] Helena Čapková, "Transnational Networkers—Iwao and Michiko Yamawaki and the Formation of Japanese Modernist Design," *Journal of Design History*, 27, 4 (2014), 370-85.

[47] *Ibid.* Čapková's paper offers a comprehensive overview of the Yamawaki's activities leading up to the Second World War.

[48] Meg Miller, "From Weimar to Tokyo," *AIGA Eye on Design*, December 4, 2019, <https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/from-weimar-to-tokyo-the-origins-and-influences-of-the-japanese-bauhaus/>.

[49] John Tran, "Minimalism: Not as Straightforward as It Seems," *The Japan Times*, August 20, 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2019/08/20/arts/minimalism-not-straightforward-seems/>.

[50] Justin McGuirk, "Braun and Beauty: Dieter Rams Comes to London's Design Museum," *The Guardian*, December 4, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/dec/04/dieter-rams-design-museum>.

[51] Fukasawa discusses his admiration for Rams in: Gary Huswit, "Rams," *Film First*, December 13, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/ramsfilm/>.

[52] *Ibid.* These guidelines are available in print and online through various sources. However, Rams states them himself in the original German (with

English subtitles) in Huswit's documentary.

[53] Steve Jobs was very much interested in several Eastern religions and philosophies, particularly Zen Buddhism, which influenced his approach to design. His enduring interest in Zen Buddhism is documented in Brent Schlender and Rick Tetzeli, *Becoming Steve Jobs: The Evolution of a Reckless Upstart into a Visionary Leader* (London: Hachette, 2015), p. 33, p. 144.

[54] Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, p. 74.

[55] The phrase "form follows function" was originally coined by the American architect Louis Sullivan in 1896, but this later became something of a mantra to many modernist designers. The phrase is discussed in historical detail in the chapter, "Utility and Significance," in Heskett, *Toothpicks and Logos: Design in Everyday Life*, pp. 35-54.

[56] From a design standpoint, simplicity is often seen as a way of removing forms that do not help promote usability. An example supporting this view is John Maeda, *The Laws of Simplicity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006). A contrasting view, which emphasizes that some interfaces are necessarily complex, is in Donald A. Norman, "Simplicity Is Highly Overrated," *Interactions*, 14, 2 (2007), 40-41.

[57] Earlier research in interaction design and Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) suggests that "What is beautiful is usable": Noam Tractinsky, A S Katz, and D Ikar, "What Is Beautiful Is Usable," *Interacting with Computers*, 13, 2 (2000), 127-145. More recent HCI research has also found that what is perceived as usable is beautiful: Kai-Christoph Hamborg, Julia Hülsmann, and Kai Kaspar, "The Interplay between Usability and Aesthetics: More Evidence for the 'What Is Usable Is Beautiful' Notion," *Advances in Human-Computer Interaction*, 2014, 1 (2014), 1-13. This is an ongoing debate in interaction design and HCI that will likely continue for some time.

[58] "Utility and Significance" in Heskett, *Toothpicks and Logos*. This chapter discusses the nuances in the interplay between an object's forms and its functionality.

[59] "Thoughtful reduction" is a term used by Maeda, *The Laws of Simplicity*, p. 1.

[60] *Ibid.*

[61] Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, pp. 35-36.

[62] Richie, *A Tractate on Japanese Aesthetics*, p. 40.

[63] The argument that much modernist design and architecture is cold and sterile dates back to criticisms of early industrial design from William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement: e.g., in Morris and Naylor, *William Morris by Himself*, p. 153. Rams' approach to modernist design has also been criticized as colorless and cold, in Cameron Shelley, "What Is Good Design?," in *Design and Society: Social Issues in Technological Design*, ed. Cameron Shelley (Cham: Springer International, 2017), pp. 1-18; ref. on p. 15. Some modernist architecture is also criticized as sterile, ugly and impersonal, e.g., Jill Pearlman, *Inventing American Modernism: Joseph Hudnut, Walter Gropius, and the Bauhaus Legacy at Harvard* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2007), p. 6. Also, in Roger Scruton, "Architects Turned Us All into Citizens of Nowhere," *The Times*, September 20, 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/architects-turned-us-all-into-citizens-of-nowhere-qmh8qkmg8>.

[64] Penick, *Tastemaker*, p. 131.

[65] Scruton discusses the culturally sterilizing effects of some modernist design in Scruton, "Architects Turned Us All into Citizens of Nowhere."

[66] See ArchDaily, "Wabi House / Tadao Ando Architect and Associates." and Buntrock, *Materials and Meaning in Contemporary Japanese Architecture:*

*Tradition and Today*. Also, Sori Yanagi's "Butterfly stool" work, which was inspired by Japanese temple design: "Sori Yanagi Butterfly Stools 1956," The Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/2279>, accessed May 15, 2020.

[67] Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, p. 157.

[68] Japanese aesthetics such as *shibumi*, according to Yanagi, have an underpinning in Zen Buddhism, e.g., Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, pp. 156-157. It is possible that Yanagi may have been suggesting that modern art and design in the West lacked religious and / or philosophical underpinnings in the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth century, but this is highly speculative. The lack of religious-inspired beauty is a point made by Scruton, which he refers to as "desecration," e.g., Scruton, *Beauty*, pp. 147-148.

[69] Saito discusses the role of culture and aesthetics in political nationalism and highlights both Zen arts and cherry blossoms in this role during the lead-up to the Second World War. For the sake of brevity and clarity, I did not properly broach this subject in this paper, but it is one well worth paying attention to: Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, pp. 194-198. See also Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms: The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[70] It is worth emphasizing that in this article I did not provide a wide-ranging account of all significant aspects of Japanese philosophy, culture, or design and it should not be considered a comprehensive survey of them. It intentionally ignored the complicated relationship between Japanese Buddhism and Shintō, that, throughout most of their history in Japan, have been syncretized. A comprehensive book on Shintō is Helen Hardacre, *Shinto: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Neither did this article account for the nuances between the dominant Japanese culture and minority cultures, such as Ainu and Ryukyuan

cultures. The following text presents an overview of Japan's minority cultures: Michael Weiner, *Japan's Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

[71] Ryohin Keikaku, "Corporate Report 2019," p. 19.