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Japanese Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art

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Abstract and Keywords

Unlike most Western aesthetics, which recognize (aesthetic) pleasure, independent of other values (truth and falsity, good and evil), as the primary value of aesthetic experience, the various Japanese aesthetics recognize a range of objectives and effects that is more complex. First, there is a wider range of types of aesthetic pleasure. Those best known and most influential in the West include *aware/mononoaware* (an awareness of the poignance of things, connected to a Buddhist sense of transience and to passing beauty); *yūgen* (deep or mysterious and powerful beauty, especially in Noh theater); *wabi* (powerlessness, loneliness, shabbiness, wretchedness); *sabi* (the beauty accompanying loneliness, solitude, quiet); and *shibui* (an ascetic quality or astringency, literally the sensation afforded by a pomegranate, which also imparts a rich but sober color to wood stains, etc.). Second, Japanese aesthetic experiences and activities are employed in the service of a wider range of objectives. These include (aesthetic) pleasure and the revelation of truth; self-cultivation that is not only artistic but also physical, social, emotional, psychological, and spiritual; the construction of personal, group, and national identity; and the formulation of relationships. This article begins with an overview of the uniqueness of Japanese aesthetics. It then examines several of the unique objectives of Japanese aesthetics in further detail.

Japanese philosophy, Japanese aesthetics, aesthetic pleasure, aware, truth

Japanese aesthetics have exerted broad, deep, and important influences on arts, on politics and power structures, and on individual lives not only in

Japan but, for the past hundred and fifty years, in Europe and America. As defined by modern Western philosophy, the definitive feature of aesthetics is the production and experience of distinctive forms of pleasure, specifically experiences of beauty, the sublime, and harmony, that are inherently valuable. Certainly the extraordinary global impact of Japanese aesthetics in the late nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries results at least in part from their ability to produce such pleasure.

Unlike most Western aesthetics, however, which recognize (aesthetic) pleasure, independent of other values (truth and falsity, good and evil), as the primary value of aesthetic experience, the various Japanese aesthetics recognize a range of objectives and effects that is more complex. First, there is a wider range of types of aesthetic pleasure. Those best known and most influential in the West include *aware/mononoaware* (##)## (an awareness of the poignance of things, connected to a Buddhist sense of transience and to passing beauty); *yūgen* ## (deep or mysterious and powerful beauty, especially in Noh theater); *wabi* # (powerlessness, loneliness, shabbiness, wretchedness); *sabi* #, (the beauty accompanying loneliness, solitude, quiet); *shibui* ## (an ascetic quality or astringency, literally the sensation afforded by a pomegranate, which also imparts a rich but sober color to wood stains, etc.); *iki* # (style or chic); *mingei* ## (folk art, craft); and aesthetics of tea: *wa* # (harmony), *kei* # (respect), *sei* # (purity), *jaku* # (tranquility), etc., (Miner et al. 1985), together called categorical aesthetics.

Second, and more important, Japanese aesthetic experiences and activities are employed in the service of a wider range of objectives. These include (aesthetic) pleasure (however it be construed) and, in addition, the revelation of truth; self-cultivation that is not only artistic but also physical, social, emotional, psychological, and spiritual (even contributing to the attainment of salvation or enlightenment); the construction of personal, group, and national identity; and the formulation of relationships (intersubjectivity or cosubjectivity). Japanese arts and aesthetics amount to “cognitive prostheses” (to use a neologism from the fields of astronomy and information science) that extend the range of physical, cognitive, social, and emotional capabilities for both practitioners and audiences.

Pointing out these differences may wrongly suggest that many Japanese aesthetics and associated phenomena are inconceivable (or imperceptible) from a Western aesthetic point of view. It also raises the question of uniqueness, as problematic as that term may be.

This chapter begins with an overview of the issue of uniqueness. After that it examines several of the unique objectives of Japanese aesthetics in further detail.

Uniqueness of Japanese Aesthetics

Japan may be the only polity that has repeatedly tried to establish its national identity or self-definition on the basis of aesthetics. Indeed, one might claim that the persistent claim of uniqueness, by both Japanese and outside observers, is itself one of the unique features of Japanese culture and identity. In fact, a (primarily Japanese) preoccupation with questions of what defines the Japanese as a people and how they differ from other nations (“Japanese exceptionalism” or, in a stronger version, “uniqueness”) has given rise to a field, *Nihonjinron* (the study of Japanese), as well as to counterarguments.¹

Three major figures defined Japanese identity based on aesthetics. Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), a founder of *kokugaku* (national learning),² saw *mono no aware* as defining the Japanese. He argued that though *aware* is seen in poetry from the *Man'yōshū* (late eighth or early ninth century, though some poems date to the fifth century), the idea as developed by Murasaki Shikibu (c. 973–after 1014) in her novel *The Tale of Genji* (ca. 1010), “enables ... generalized sociality, transfiguring personal woes into a communal reverberation of sympathy” (Yoda 2004, 141). and Chinese literatures evinced nothing like Murasaki's concerns. *Aware* codifies Japanese life in ways still felt today. Kuki Shūzō (1888–1941) claimed a similar role for *iki*, the sense of style or elegance characterizing *bons vivants* in the Edo period (1615–1868).³ Yanagi Sōetsu (aka Y. Muneyoshi, 1889–1961) identified *mingei* (folk arts) as the definitive aesthetic—although, ironically, his theory was partially based on the aesthetics of Korean ceramics (see Brandt 2007).

The issue of purported Japanese uniqueness is exaggerated. After all, Japanese aesthetic values cannot be unique to the Japanese, or the rest of the world would not have pursued them to the extent they have. Indeed, there are real problems with the concept of Japanese uniqueness. The claims of uniqueness are sometimes self-contradictory. Moreover, none of them applies to all Japanese or all segments of Japanese society. A vast number of Japanese know or demonstrate nothing of the pertinent aesthetics. Often the claim of uniqueness is countered by Japanese and Americans on the basis either of its reductive or essentializing effects that make such claims either mistaken or demeaning (and usually in a self-serving way). Peter N. Dale

lists three problematic aspects of “uniqueness.” First, it assumes that the Japanese constitute a culturally homogeneous racial entity, whose essence is unchanged from prehistorical times to the present day. (This is demonstrably erroneous on empirical and scientific grounds.) Second, it presupposes that the Japanese differ radically from all other known peoples. Third, it is consciously nationalistic, displaying a conceptual and procedural hostility to any mode of analysis that might be seen to derive from external, non-Japanese sources. In a general sense, then, the *nihonjinron* may be defined as works of cultural nationalism concerned with the ostensible “uniqueness” of Japan in any aspect, and that are hostile to both individual experience and the notion of internal socio-historical diversity (Dale 1986, ii).

Yet uniqueness itself need not entail essentialization of Japanese character or culture. In fact, a number of unique events features have significant aesthetic dimensions. The Jōmon ##, the earliest people in Japan, for example, are the only hunting-gathering people known to have developed pottery. Dance and music, used to entice the Sun Goddess out of her cave,⁴ play unusual roles in creation myths and worship.⁵ Japanese *shōgun* # # (medieval lords) may well be the only military rulers in world history who were also masters of aesthetics and connoisseurs, and whose closest advisors—including generals—were masters of aesthetics. (Sen no Rikyū # # # [1522–1591], the founder of modern tea ceremony aesthetics, was advisor to *shōguns* Oda Nobunaga #### [1534–1582] and Toyotomi Hideyoshi # # # [1537–1598].) *Shōguns* even used aesthetic mastery and involvement in the arts as a strategy to preoccupy the warrior class and prevent fighting. The mainstreaming of women's voices in a civilization's canon is similarly without parallel, and with ramifications yet to be explored (Miller 1993). Arts and aesthetics have contributed to the reconstruction of culture and values after the mass trauma of atomic attacks. These historical facts should not be used to essentialize Japanese character or culture. They do point to its exceptional reliance on aesthetics.

Contrasting Definitions of Aesthetics

Since the eighteenth century, when the term and the field of inquiry were introduced by Hume, Shaftesbury, Burke, and especially Kant, “aesthetics” in Europe and America has referred to the *study* of (1) certain kinds of intrinsically valuable experience (called aesthetic) of (perhaps numerous varieties of) pleasure, especially experience of the Beautiful and the Sublime; (2) the conditions arousing such experience (whether artistic or natural); and (3) certain kinds of related activity such as expression, self-expression,

obfuscation or support of ideology, and so forth. A distancing or removal of experience from ordinary expectations of utility and from considerations of truth/falsity and good/bad is usually thought to be a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for aesthetic experience.⁶

One may think that the distancing or detachment from ordinary life that is characteristic of Buddhism characterizes Japanese aesthetics. Steve Odin, for example, emphasizes detachment in (Buddhist) aesthetics and presents Kyoto School philosophers such as Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990), Hisamatsu Shin'ichi (1889–1980) as

articulat[ing] a threefold dialectical Zen logic of emptiness that moves from “being” (*u*) to “relative nothingness” (*sōtaiteki mu*) to “absolute nothingness” (*zettai mu*), which in turn corresponds to a sliding scale of degrees of attachment and nonattachment. While the eternalistic standpoint of being is characterized by attachment to the separate ego and substantial objects, and the nihilistic standpoint of relative nothingness is characterized by attachment to nothingness itself, the middle way of absolute nothingness is characterized by a mental attitude of total nonattachment that affirms things in their concrete particularity without clinging to either being or nonbeing, existence or nonexistence, form or emptiness, presence or absence. (Odin 2001, 121)⁷

It is equally possible, however, to view the entire history of Japanese arts and aesthetics as just the opposite: a series of attempts to make every aspect of daily life an aesthetic experience, even possibly entailing attachment.⁸ This may be a matter of attitude, like the detachment Odin describes, but it focuses more on actions and objects (or their arrangement or relations, or the space between them [*ma* #]).⁹ As a result, in this view aesthetics are often tied to the notions of identity, self-cultivation, and personal relationships.

Before venturing into these exceptional aspects of Japanese aesthetics, we need to address the applicability of the term “aesthetics” in the context of Japan. As Michele Marra correctly points out, the term “aesthetics” was introduced only in the eighteenth century. Hence, he argues, applying it outside the modern West (and especially in Japan) is inappropriate (Marra 1999). Indeed, prior to the Japanese discovery of German philosophers in the

Meiji ## period (1868–1911), nothing comparable to this strict usage of the philosophical term “aesthetic” was known in Japan.

Ever since Japanese writers began studying Western aesthetics in the Meiji, however, they have both studied its applicability to their own preexisting concepts and phenomena, and used it in their own ways.¹⁰ Unless we accept these wider usages as “aesthetic,” there is no ready way to refer to these various usages.

Marra's criticism, in any event, applies only to the strictest definition. For even in Western philosophy, the term “aesthetics” commonly has two additional meanings. It is also used by philosophers to denote *any* study within the philosophy of art (and the nonutilitarian use of nature), such as the ontology, epistemology, phenomenology of art, and so forth. This is the definition used by the American Society for Aesthetics and the British Society for Aesthetics and their journals. Also, the term is retrospectively applied to any philosophy of art or beauty, going back to Plato (427–347 BCE). Japan has a thirteen-hundred-year history of writing about art in these ways, and “aesthetics” is a useful way of referring to it so long as we do not mislead ourselves into thinking that what the earlier Japanese writers were doing is identical to or philosophically dependent on Western aesthetics.

Aesthetic Pleasure: Everyday Life

There have been several Japanese approaches that convert ordinary aspects of everyday life into an aesthetic work or act. Ornamentation of everyday objects through artistry, design, and embellishment is characteristic of Japanese material culture generally and even reveals the spiritual dimensions of everyday life and objects (Tsuji 1994). A distinctively upper-class version is the Heian ## era (794–1185) notion of *miyabi* #, courtly elegance, described by Murasaki in *The Tale of Genji* and by Sei Shōnagon ##### (c. 966–1017) in *The Pillow Book* (*Makura no Sōshi* #####, c. 990–1002). In a different context (the middle-class life of the pleasure quarters and the dandy about town), we can observe in the Edo period notion *iki* (varieties of chic or stylishness), in which every decision has aesthetic import, not only the choice of fabric for one's clothes, but also the angle of its drapery and physical posture.

Many people take Zen # Buddhist aesthetics in a similar way: as a reworking of everyday objects, spaces, arrangements of objects, and activities to make them conform to aesthetic values and produce aesthetic experience. An ability to produce (certain kinds of) aesthetically satisfying works

(calligraphy, painting, garden design) is sometimes seen as evidence of enlightenment. Artworks by Zen masters are valued largely for that reason.

In the case of Zen aesthetics, however, the value of aesthetic experience must be carefully examined. First, Dōgen Zenji (1200–1253) (aka Dōgen Kigen), the founder of the Sōtō school of Zen and the mastermind behind Zen aesthetics (Heine 1989, 1991; Yokoi Yūhō 1976), valued aesthetic experience, recommending it be incorporated into the daily life of monks (in his discussions of preparation of food, for instance). Yet his recommendation seems to have been for an *instrumental* reason—for the fact that if people enjoyed eating, they were less distracted from their ultimate purpose of seeking enlightenment. Second, it would seem that in Zen, the aesthetic contributes to the pursuit of enlightenment by eliminating unnecessary chaos and distraction, such as that provided either by lack of aesthetic awareness (clutter) or by other kinds of aesthetics: the gorgeous, the flamboyant, and so forth. It contributes a specific kind of tranquility to mental life that is valuable not only inherently but also instrumentally—for the ways it helps you attain larger goals, including (but not limited to) enlightenment. It is instrumental in that it contributes to reaching the spiritual goal that is distanced from the goals of ordinary life—finding food and shelter, accumulation of wealth, political advancement, and so forth.

Nonetheless, in the context of Buddhism, one must consider the possibility of more direct relations between aesthetic experience and enlightenment. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy drew attention to the recognition within even early Theravada Buddhism of aesthetic shock (Pali *samvega*) as an inherently valuable experience and a catalyst for enlightenment, and to the Theravada comparison of reactions to beauty with reactions to divinity (Coomaraswamy 1943). A sudden shift of *attitude* toward an ordinary object may provoke or be analogous to enlightenment.

Something strikingly similar seems to occur in Shinto—without, of course, a doctrinal connection to enlightenment: a sense of the power inherent in natural beauty that grabs one's attention and overwhelms one with its force. It is this awareness that is considered by some as the source not only of much early poetry but also of Murasaki's *aware*—and theorized by Motoori as the source of Japanese sociality and identity when shared with others through poetry (Yoda 2004, 129–130).

Not only decorated artifacts but also undecorated or natural objects may inspire specifically aesthetic experience. This tendency, which came to be called *aware* or *mononoaware*, the “ah-ness” of things, was well established

by the time of the *Man'yōshū*. With *aware*, one recognizes aspects of the natural environment, such as blossoms falling, as worthy of contemplation and productive of enjoyment. *Waka* ## (Japanese- as opposed to Chinese-style poems) focusing on such topics record the poet's initial perception or flash of insight and trigger another in readers. In *haiku* ##, too, we see that anything can inspire aesthetic experience, though in *haiku* it is expressed in ordinary, not poetic, language. For Matsuo Bashō ## ## (1644–1694), the most celebrated *haiku* poet, even the sound of water as a frog jumps in is worthy of aesthetic celebration.

Making, serving, and drinking tea, moreover, have been made into aesthetic experience, converted into fine art by complex means.¹¹ Aesthetic attitude is crucial: Sen tea ceremony uses peasant objects (iron teakettles, bamboo implements), local rather than exotic or out-of-season flowers, and architecture based on simple farmers' huts. They become valuable aesthetic objects through their recognition as such (as Yanagi showed with regard to Korean folk pottery, whose aesthetic value is ignored by the farmers who make and use it, and recognized only by the Japanese), by ritual, and by their new context. Taking them out of their original context does not mean eliminating use, however (unlike putting them into a museum). On the contrary, they are put to the purpose of transforming mundane activities (eating, drinking tea, sharing time with friends) into art of the highest order.

While all of these cases are distanced from everyday concerns in the sense of ordinary people's and society's obsessions, none is separated from either the pursuit of ordinary everyday activities (eating, washing up) or from the ultimate “interest” the individual has in his or her spiritual welfare. In the end, disinterestedness, so crucial to Western aesthetics, may not be of much use in understanding Japanese aesthetics, as the duality on which it is based is faulty.

Aesthetics, Art, and Truth

The first Japanese to theorize art was Kūkai ## (aka Kōbō Daishi ####, 774–835), for whom arts were forms of religious activity. Kūkai, a renowned Buddhist priest, calligrapher, and poet (in Chinese), studied esoteric Buddhism in China for two years, brought the Shingon ##(True Word) school of esoteric Buddhism back to Japan, and established the renowned Kōya-san ### Temple. Kūkai identified four categories of religious activity: painting (especially *mandalas*) and sculpture; music and literature; “gestures and acts” (ritual, dance, and *mudrās*, religious hand positions of Indian origin used in meditation); and implements of civilization and religion. Awa Henro

points out that “The importance that Kōbō Daishi ... placed on architecture should not be underestimated, [he] went so far as to prescribe the ideal symmetry, shape and geometric forms suitable for use in an altar” (Awa 1983, 11).¹²

For Kūkai, arts were not only forms of religious rituals but also means to understanding truth, or wisdom, that language could barely approach. Kūkai reported that his Chinese master, Abbot Huiguo ## (746–805):

Informed me that the Esoteric scriptures are so abstruse that their meaning cannot be conveyed except through art. ... In truth, the esoteric doctrines are so profound as to defy their enunciation in writing. With the help of painting, however, their obscurities may be understood. (Tsunoda, de Bary, and Keene 1958, 141)

Given the dramatic increases in intellectual understanding afforded in the modern and postmodern world by cartography, graphs, three-dimensional modeling, and so forth, we may now have a greater sympathy than we once had for the Buddhist claim that visual records can make complex realities clearer than can language. (If language seems to us today superior to visual arts in its ability to express ideas, it may be because we have in fact learned how to make ordinary language support conceptual innovation, and have developed philosophical thought—in natural, computer, logical and mathematical languages.)

It is important to note that, although the Buddhist view, like Plato's, is that the phenomenal world is an illusion, no view could be more diametrically opposed than Kūkai's to Plato's conception of art as imitation of an apparent “reality” that is itself only shadows of reality. That is, while the phenomenal world may be an illusion in both cases, there is in Buddhist metaphysics no ideal world behind it that is obscured. What we take to be reality may be an illusion, and language may inevitably distort our perceptions of reality, but visual arts may provide the clearest indication of reality (outside of its direct apprehension through enlightened meditation). Similarly, in sharp contrast to Plato's explicit dictum that “the poets lie too much,” the Japanese view that art provides access to truth that is superior to that provided by language similarly privileges literary over literal (logical) language.

The driving force of Kūkai's impact derives from his own enlightenment, buttressed—and made evident for subsequent generations—by his masterful poetry and calligraphy. This initiates a tradition of grounding aesthetics in either enlightenment or total mastery of an art that continues through today.

Japan's greatest theorists have often also been her great artists (at least until the introduction of Western philosophy in the late nineteenth century)—even when they also worked in the military, religion, or science.

The Construction of Personal and National Identity

In addition to the varieties of aesthetic pleasure (categorical aesthetics) that have been so appealing to the West, there turn out to have been also political and economic (and, I would argue, resulting emotional and psychological) motivations and forces to Japanese aesthetics as they have functioned within Japan, between Japan and the West, and between Japan and other parts of Asia. Ideological dimensions especially have received increasing academic recognition and investigation over the past three decades, including the roles played by aesthetics in rationalizing World War II, the invasions and occupation of Korea and China, and the historical roles played by poetry, poetic aesthetics, and Buddhist and Shinto architecture (and to a lesser extent painting and sculpture) in struggles for power and political legitimation (Ebersole 1989; Huey 1989; La Fleur 1983; Marra 1993).¹³ Such complex investigations of Japanese aesthetics have helped eliminate mistaken assumptions of transcendence (and disinterest) that have been an important source of the justification and appeal of aesthetics in the West but are inappropriate when applied to Japan, where there is little philosophical or religious justification for using “transcendence.” Such readings lead to an essentializing / “orientalizing” gaze that subjugates Japan to colonialist agendas—while ignoring Japan's own political agendas.

In the face of Westerners' exoticization of Japan, the Japanese found themselves needing to define, or redefine, themselves outside the essentializing, idealizing, demonizing, or demeaning Gaze (Davis 1996). Film director Kurosawa Akira ### (1910–1998) achieved the apotheosis, taking the problem of the objectifying gaze of the other literally in *Rashōmon* # # (1950), restoring the victim to her position as Subject by allowing us to view her rape from her eyes¹⁴; his ascription of legitimacy to varying viewpoints of an event introduced “Rashomon” into English as a descriptor. But well before this, in the context of the large role played by the aesthetic in Japanese national identity, the Japanese had seized the initiative to make themselves—and their points of view—known and *felt* to Americans and Europeans through the arts and aesthetics, by means of exhibitions, translations of texts, and performances. Industrial and fine-arts exhibitions allow viewers to see the objects Japanese see and adopt the Japanese subject position toward these objects. The impact can be surprisingly long-

lasting: Japan's participation in the Centennial International Exhibition of 1876 held in Fairmount Park in Philadelphia, and the presence of a temple gate of historical significance ("Nimon" burnt 1955), were factors in deciding to award Shofuso Japanese House and Garden to that city after its initial exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art; as a result, it continues to make Japanese aesthetics publicly available today.

Translations of literature, of texts on aesthetics,¹⁵ and of documentary and feature films both explain and demonstrate the aesthetics. Performing and martial arts also engage the audience as active participants, enabling them to *act in the ways* Japanese act. Film director Ozu Yasujirō ### (1903–1963) was innovative in his insistence on the importance of shared point of view (Davis's "objectified spectatorship" [Davis 1996, 90–92]); he is famous not only for setting his cameras at the traditional sight level for people sitting in the traditional way on *tatami* mats, but also for screwing the cameras in place so they would not be moved.¹⁶

Even more interestingly, the Japanese have planted masses of cherry trees (in Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and elsewhere) and built gardens (San Francisco, Philadelphia, and many "sister cities"). Film, performing arts, tree plantings, and gardens afford visitors opportunities to interact with Japanese environments and to see (and smell, hear, feel) things from cherished time-honored Japanese perspectives. Such activities are less a soliciting of the gaze of the other than the extension of invitations to the other to see the world from one's perspective; it is a mode of constructing an intersubjectivity, or cosubjectivity.

Analyses of Japanese arts and aesthetics have revealed the degree to which the Gaze is central to the construction of Japanese versions of selfhood and co- or intersubjectivities, including the studies of "objectified spectatorship" in "monument" Japanese film (Davis 1996), psychoanalysis of child-raising practices evinced in *ukiyo-e* ### prints,¹⁷ and poetry and prints (Miller 1998).

Collective identity, the shared sense of self, and the relations between arts, self-reflection, or interiority and identification with others have barely begun to be studied in the visual and performing arts, however. Due to the relative ease with which one can pin down differences between Indo-European and Japanese written language (the avoidance of pronouns in Japanese, for instance) and to the intense self-awareness of early modern fiction writers in Japan, especially in the "I"-novel (Walker 1979, Suzuki 1996), these issues are better understood in of literary aesthetics, where they help explore "a

political subject adequate to the task of resisting authoritarian rule” (Yoda 2004, 117), than in other arts (Karatani 1993; Lippit 2002; Miller, 2010/11; Nishiuchi 1997; see also Lebra 2004).

Aesthetics, Self-Cultivation, and Self-Realization

Drawing upon the early Buddhist—and Shinto—predilection for the aesthetic, and drawing further encouragement from exhortations in *The Lotus Sūtra* to build *stupas* and images of Buddhas, copy *sūtras*, and make music, early Japanese Buddhists took art making seriously. In addition to the many issues already mentioned, there is also the issue of the expansion of art and the aesthetic to forms of self-cultivation (shugyō ##) fundamental to Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist self-realization or self-actualization, and to the construction of persons and subjectivities, often resulting in an overlap of aesthetic and spiritual. (See, for example, Carter 2008; Miller 1993.) Artistic cultivation becomes both evidence of and a way (*michi* or *dō* #, “road,” “path”) to self-actualization and ultimate realization: *gei dō* ##, the way of the arts. Because of this—and also as a function of the technology of ink painting and calligraphy, (shugyō ##) which are highly susceptible to the artist's character and to spontaneous nuances of her mood and intentions—the person is revealed rather fully in the artwork. An artist's character is also evinced in the arts, including both innate temperament and the results of lifelong practices and discipline and overarching choices of what kind of person to be. In this way an artwork becomes, to the audience, an image of the artist.

By the time Kūkai traveled to China, artistic discoveries of enormous significance had already been achieved.¹⁸ The greatest is the discovery of the expressive potential of calligraphic brushwork. This expressive potential has two sources. First, it is a function of the unique technology of East Asian calligraphy: an extremely pliant brush applying ink to paper or silk. The pliancy of the brush permits great variability in the width of lines and the beginnings and endings of strokes, permitting infinite variation—but also demanding complete control of the brush. The ink's incorrigibility demands total command, and this command requires both knowledge and physical training—physical training that is not limited to arm and hand but involves the entire muscular, breathing and circulatory systems as well.

The second source is the discovery by Wang Xizhi (Chinese: ###, 303–361) that the act of writing could be like the flight of geese: not a pattern of disconnected lines and dots (like stone carving), but continuous lines, broken at the calligrapher's discretion (and the physical limits of the ink-

holding capacity of the particular brush) rather than the pre-given ideal form of the character being written. From Wang Xizhi on, this expressive potential has been available for everyone who trains to the brush—that is, to every literate person. As a result, everyone who becomes literate receives the rudiments of an artistic education—which is also a somato-spiritual education (with emotional implications), and this basis for artistic expression has the potential for virtually infinite development, whenever the individual is ready to commit herself to it. The additional discovery of the expressive capacities of gradations of ink and, in Japan, of the expressive possibilities of the adornment of the paper, interweaves the physical features of the spatiotemporal world with the character, training, and mind-set of the calligrapher, allowing the interrelations of human being and physical world (the season, etc.) to be expressed as well.

This happy conflation of necessity and freedom, of physical and mental, of practical and aesthetic, of personal and situational, was seized upon by all the major Chinese religio-philosophical traditions (Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism), and developed within both those and indigenous traditions in Korea and Japan as well, as one of a number of paths of self-cultivation. Artistry is thus not necessarily dependent on innate talent, or “genius,” but on self-cultivation (Hahn 2007; Matsumoto 2007).

Calligraphy, then, provided a basic model for understanding other arts (and ways of self-cultivation). Arts came to be used to cultivate concentration, attention, and various kinds of noticing—all aspects contributing to selfhood and self-consciousness. Arts are accorded unusually important roles in the Confucian or Buddhist cultivation of personhood, in terms of ways of development in the arts, as a way of life, and as paths of spiritual development.

Relationship, Intersubjectivity, and/or Cosubjectivity in Japanese Aesthetics

Related to the issues of personal identity and self-cultivation is another important characteristic: the degree to which arts require active participation by the “audience” to fill in information, contribute actively to the process of completing the work. This active participation in the work by the audience presupposes even as it provides an aesthetic and artistic education on the part of the audience. This education is at once education in the arts and cultivation of the self, along spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and social terms that cannot always be differentiated. Within Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist studies of self-cultivation, arts are now recognized in the West as highly significant (Carter 2008; Chang 1963).

The importance of the audience also suggests that the work of art is not achieved by the artist alone, but in company with the audience. There is a collusion or collaboration (not unremarked in Western aesthetics as well, of course), a topic requiring further study. This is not to suggest that Japanese arts are somehow imitative or collectively produced. On the contrary, aesthetics and arts provide arenas to develop extraordinary individuality and genius.

Nonetheless, “internal” awareness of oneself that in the West is a function of the development of the modern self or subject requires a special examination in the context of Japanese aesthetics. The modern Western notion of individual “self” may seem absent in Japanese arts, literature, and language (Miyoshi 1974), though this absence may be misleading (Miller 1997; Yoda 2004). As Thomas P. Kasulis has argued, the search for, creation of, and recognition of intimacy are fundamental dynamics and organizational structures in Japan (often at the expense of autonomy) (Kasulis 2002). In aesthetics, too, relationship is an important objective. Analysts have explored the numerous ways that Japanese arts and aesthetics constitute the structure of the self or subject and self-other relations, as various forms of subjectivity and shared subjectivity (“we-selves”): intersubjectivity and/or cosubjectivity. Pertinent to aesthetics is the well-marked tendency to view feeling (both emotional and aesthetic) as inhering in situations rather than individuals (Kasulis 1985; Miller 1998) Murasaki and Sei Shōnagon also developed feminist aesthetics (Miller 2011; Yoda 2004).

“Cosubjectivity” is a form of subjectivity (of inhabiting “subject positions”) where two or more subjects share in a “we-self” (whether the latter is understood as permanent or temporary) (Miller 1998). Cosubjectivity is distinguished from the Phenomenological concept of “intersubjectivity” in which two autonomous subjects relate to each other and take each other into account. Intersubjectivity is at the core of many discussions of Japanese arts, such as tea and Noh performance (Nishiuchi 1997). In even the least “theoretical” (in modern terms) analyses of tea, the guest-host relationship, a special form of intersubjectivity, is central. It seems to be intersubjectivity that pertains, for instance, when one performs the tea ceremony before going into battle, where independent (yet coordinated) action will be called for. Yet before undertaking the battle, in which obviously one might be killed, there is a moment, orchestrated by the tea ceremony, in which to celebrate life—and the relationships one has with others who join in the tea. This is a moment in which the “otherness of the other” and, at the same time, the separation from oneself are of the utmost significance. This would seem to

be a case of the arts functioning in ways that establish a We-Relation (in Alfred Schutz's phrase).

On the other hand, it is equally clear (*pace* Miyoshi) that the Japanese have at least a thousand-year history of several of the components of the modern Western notion of self (Miller 1997). We see in Murasaki, particularly in Kashiwagi's ## “soliloquy” in *The Tale of Genji*, and in some *Man'yōshū* poets' reflections on time and on the unreliability of memory, for example, the habits of self-reflection and many components of the self, that we treasure in St. Augustine (who is commonly taken as the precursor of the modern self) and take as definitive of self-reflection. Similarly, Buddhist debates between *jiriki* ## (self-power) and *tariki* ## (other-power) parallel Christian debates about Grace, and so forth.

The shared or collective sense of self described in the social science literatures on Japan is established by the collective—often with the (apparently) willing cooperation of the subjects themselves—by means of social institutions, customs, and rules. But individuals have choices: how far and in what ways to participate, and with whom. Arts take an active role in elaborating this realm of individual initiative—and use personal relationship to develop students' artistry (Hahn 2007).¹⁹

Conclusion: The Compass of Japanese Aesthetics

While few deny the pleasures provided by Japanese art and aesthetics, pleasure, important as it is, is only one of many ends or rewards derived from art and aesthetics in Japan. For twelve centuries, since the earliest philosophy of art, arts have been recognized as providing a privileged access to truth, superior in some cases to that of language. For several hundred years, Japanese writers have recognized aesthetics at the core of Japanese identity. For over a millennium, Japanese writers have attested that aesthetics provide what amount to “cognitive prostheses” for access to truth and for the development of special forms of self-cultivation, interiority, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and cosubjectivity. Objectives and effects of Japanese aesthetics, then, differ from those commonly recognized in the West.

The value of Japanese aesthetics lies less in the knowledge they give us about the Japanese (whether they be “we” or “they”), intrinsically interesting as it is, than in the truths they expose about the human condition and about the views of it we construct, the means they provide for articulating—and strengthening—relationships (among living human beings, with our

forebears and future generations, and with the natural world), the skills they impart (especially in various kinds of attention, concentration, noticing, and awareness), the conceptual tools and “cognitive prostheses” they provide for philosophical analysis of standard philosophical concerns (ethical, epistemological, metaphysical, the nature of self and community), and their ample provision of inexhaustible realms of delight.

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Notes:

(1.) Hardly a discipline, it is more a self- (or group) indulgence. See Lebra, [2004](#), and for a vehement critique of *Nihonjinron*, Dale [1986](#).

(2.) As opposed to Confucian or Buddhist studies, etc. His colleagues in the early *kokugaku* movement included Keichū ## (1640–1701) and Kamo no Mabuchi #### (1697–1769).

(3.) Some have claimed that Kuki's theory was explicitly part of the rationalization of imperial expansion leading to World War II, but Kuki scholars are by no means in agreement on his intentions or complicity. See, for example, Nara [2004](#) and Pincus [1966](#). All names are in Japanese order.

(4.) This fundamental significance of dance—perpetuated in shrine festivals—was categorized by one Shinto priest, interviewed by Joseph Campbell, as the equivalent of Judeo-Christian theology (Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* [New York: Doubleday, 1988], p. xix).

(5.) Tsuji [1994](#) speculates that dances for the gods may be the basis of decorative aesthetics (*kazari*).

(6.) There are, of course, exceptions. Marxist and neo-Marxist theories of art as superstructure providing justification for prevailing ideology comprise the major exceptions to this view.

(7.) See also Marra [2001](#), especially the chapter by Iwaki Ken'ichi [2001](#).

(8.) Some philosophical implications of such a view are explored by Crispin Sartwell [1995](#).

(9.) As a principal operant within the arts, *ma* is clearly of ancient origins. However, it entered discussions of aesthetics relatively recently, in English primarily through the writings of architect Arata Isozaki ### (1931–) (Isozaki [1978](#), [2006](#)) and anthropologist/semiotician Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney (Ohnuki-Tierney [1994](#)). See also Arima [1991](#); Kenmochi [1978](#); and Anon 1981.

(10.) The history of the introduction of the European philosophical concepts of “aesthetics” is presented and analyzed by Marra [1999](#), especially the

Introduction and pp. 43 and 83; by nearly two dozen current Japanese philosophers in Marra [2001](#); and by Odin [2001](#).

(11.) Tea Ceremony has had three phases of artistic development: its initial flowering into an opportunity to showcase beauty, stylishness, and gorgeousness; shaped by Sen no Rikyū, who studied Zen at Daitoku-ji ###, into an austere *wabi/sabi* aesthetic; and the global influence under Tenshin Okakura Kakuzō (##) #### (1862–1913) through *The Book of Tea* (1906), an immensely successful English explication of some Japanese aesthetics. (It was the last that influenced Frank Lloyd Wright.)

(12.) See Faure [1996](#) for the evolution of these issues in Kamakura Buddhism. Faure argues that architecture (especially *stupas*) established theoretical connections between different philosophies (p. 231). The same point could be made about *honji suijaku* mandara paintings ####, which relate Buddhist and Shinto “deities” (Tyler [1992](#), ch. 5). Regarding the performative aspects of Buddhist objects, analogous to performative language, see Faure pp. 232, 253, 260, and *passim*.

(13.) See Faure [1996](#) for issues regarding visual arts and symbolism.

(14.) This type of shot was used again to great acclaim in Jonathan Kaplan's *The Accused* (1988) and in KumaiKei's ### (1930–2007) *Sandakan No. 8 ## ####* (1974), where, however, the victim's viewpoint has been edited out of prints by some American distributor(s), presumably because of a taboo in the United States about giving a victim's point of view.

(15.) Among the most influential were Okakura [1906](#) (sufficiently influential that a mini-industry of criticism has grown around it); Anesaki [1932](#); Suzuki [1959](#); Kato [1971](#); and Kawabata [1968](#).

(16.) Both Kurosawa and Ozu have evoked a considerable literature; there are at least four books in English on Ozu. (see Bordwell [1988](#); Dessler [1997](#); Richie [1977](#); Schrader [1988](#)) and nine on Kurosawa.

(17.) Daniel Freeman, unpublished papers on mothers and infants sharing a gaze in ukiyo-e and on “Looking, Self-Regulation and Sensitivity to Feelings of Shame in Younger Japanese Children,” International House in Tokyo, 1995; Doho University, 1995; the American Psychoanalytic Association of New York, 1995; Kyushu University, 1996; and Japan Psychoanalytical Association of Tokyo, 1996.

(18.) They include the correlation of spatial with temporal progression to illustrate narrative; use of centrality, size, and elaboration to indicate spiritual or social importance of a figure; miniaturization of a landscape or plants to indicate the macrocosm on a microcosmic level; etc., as well as technical discoveries like lost-wax bronze casting.

(19.) Artists' sense of their individuality and the development of modern perceptions of their worth are only beginning to be studied. Melinda Takeuchi's study of "Ike(no) Taiga" # (#/#) ## (1723-1776) is a pioneer in this regard, as is Lawrence Marceau's study of the early rise of *bunjin* ## ("literati") consciousness (Takeuchi 1994; Marceau 2004). See also Bullen 2010 and Miller 2007.

