The Japanese Aesthetics of Imperfection and Insufficiency

The Japanese aesthetic tradition, just like any other cultural tradition, encompasses diverse tastes and arts. They range from the minimalism of Noh theater to the flamboyance of Kabuki theater, the somber severity of monochrome brush ink paintings to the opulence of gold-guided screen paintings, and the simple rusticity of tea huts to the august majesty of castles. Among these diverse aesthetic phenomena and pursuits, one theme stands out for being somewhat unusual, yet is generally identified as forming a quintessentially Japanese taste. It is the celebration of those qualities commonly regarded as falling short of, or deteriorating from, the optimal condition of the object. Specifically, these qualities are found in objects with defects, an impoverished look, or aging effects, as well as in a landscape or the moon obscured by clouds, mist, or fog.

I shall refer to this Japanese appreciation of the aged, the obscured, the impoverished, and the defective as "the Japanese aesthetics of imperfection and insufficiency." In the following discussion, I shall explore the aesthetic, social, historical, and philosophical dimensions of this Japanese aesthetic taste. I hope to shed light on the complexity of this aesthetic phenomenon which is intertwined with diverse aspects of the Japanese people's lives.

1. EXAMPLES

This aesthetics of imperfection and insufficiency first developed as a celebration of a natural aging process or obscuring effect. For example, consider a series of aesthetic preferences noted by a tenth-century court lady and one of the first trendsetters in Japanese sensibility, Sei Shōnagon (965-1020), in her well-known essays in The Pillow Book. One of the things which she considers hideous is "a new cloth screen with a colorful and cluttered painting of many cherry blossoms," while she is excited by "noticing that one's elegant Chinese mirror has become a little cloudy." As for her taste in garden ponds, she dislikes "those in which everything is carefully laid out," she much prefers "one that has been left to itself so that it is wild and covered with weeds."

Sei Shōnagon's taste, typical of the ancient Japanese court aesthetic sensibility, was inherited and further developed by Yoshida Kenkō (c. 1283-c. 1350), a retired Buddhist monk. His influence on the subsequent development in Japanese aesthetics as well as philosophy of life is quite significant. In an oft-quoted passage regarded as the manifesto of the aesthetics of imperfection and insufficiency, he states the following:

Are we to look at cherry blossoms only in full bloom, the moon only when it is cloudless? To long for the moon while looking on the rain, to lower the blinds and be unaware of the passing of the spring—these are even more deeply moving. Branches about to blossom or gardens strewn with faded flowers are worthier of our admiration.

Similarly, regarding artifacts, he finds aesthetic appeal in those objects that show wear and tear or that are incomplete:

It is only after the silk wrapper has frayed at top and bottom, and the mother-of-pearl has fallen from the roller that a scroll looks beautiful. I was impressed to hear the Abbot Kōyū say, "It is typical of the unintelligent man to insist on assembling complete sets of everything. Imperfect sets are better." In everything,
no matter what it may be, uniformity and completeness are undesirable.  

It was during the sixteenth century, with the flourishing of the tea ceremony, that this aesthetics of imperfection became established as a principle of artistic creation. The first stage was to incorporate in its artistic creation "found objects" which have already been damaged, aged, or blemished. For example, weather-beaten or moss-covered rocks were aggressively pursued for use as stepping stones, lanterns, and water basins in tea gardens. Tea huts were made to appear rustic and impoverished with an unpainted, stark interior with a crooked tree for a pillar and caked mud for walls.

By far the most conspicuous examples can be found in tea wares and utensils for the ceremony. Impoverished-looking and irregularly shaped Korean peasants' bowls, often with chips and cracks, were highly esteemed for use in the tea ceremony. The accidental damages to tea wares or signs of their age did not step their use; either the bowls were left unrepairs or the trace of repair was left visible. Furthermore, many tea wares were cherished precisely because of these seeming defects. A seventeenth-century record of the teachings of tea masters explicitly states:

Concerning the tea utensils for the small tea room ... it is recommended that they should, in every way and aspect, fall rather short of perfection. There are people who find it repugnant to have a tiniest defect in them. This I do not understand.  

That "defective" wares were indeed fully appreciated and utilized is evidenced by the specific instructions left by Sen no Rikyū (1522–1591), perhaps the most noted tea master, concerning how to handle a tea bowl with a big crack.

One of the accomplishments of the tea masters was to go beyond merely appreciating these signs of imperfection by actually creating the appearance of imperfection and impoverishment. For example, in pursuit of domestically produced tea bowls, tea masters commissioned potters to emulate the plain rusticity of Korean wares. In addition, they also resorted to what may be called iconoclastic acts. Consider the action of Murata Shukō (1423–1502), a founder of the tea ceremony, when he received a gift from his patron Shogun. It was an exquisite and colorful tenth-century Chinese silk painting of two white herons. Shukō proceeded to change its scroll from gold brocade to subdued-colored damask, eliminated a thin strip of cloth immediately below the painting which is required for any proper framing, and replaced the ivory bottom roll with a branch from a Chinese quince. The resultant hanging scroll, thus transformed to appear less opulent, is said to have continued to impress the succeeding tea masters.

Or consider another anecdote of a tea master and his disciple who found a perfectly formed flower vase with symmetrical handles. The master purchased the vase and the disciple was invited to the tea ceremony the following day. The disciple hid a hammer in his sleeve, hoping to make the vase even more appealing by breaking one of its handles. To his surprise, the disciple found that the master had already broken a handle to diminish the well-formed appearance of the vase.

Finally, another tea master, Furuta Oribe (1543–1615), was somewhat ridiculed by his contemporary who claimed:

This man destroys treasures. He trims a scroll to improve its shape, and he breaks an unblemished tea bowl or a tea caddy and then repairs it to make it more amusing.

There are important aesthetic differences between a vase whose handle broke off by accident and an identical vase whose handle was intentionally broken off. Chips and cracks on a tea bowl have different aesthetic connotations depending upon whether they are due to a natural aging process or a part of the calculated design. For the moment, however, I will not address these differences; let me instead explore the reasons behind these seemingly unusual aesthetic tastes and pursuits.

II. AESTHETIC CONSIDERATIONS

The emergence of this aesthetics of imperfection and insufficiency can be partly explained by the aesthetic value of contrast. One of the hallmarks of the traditional Japanese aesthetic design principle is harmony brought about by juxtaposing disparate, often contrasting, elements. The unity of the whole is designed to
emerge spontaneously from the contribution of each element, rather than each part subsumed under a preconceived, overall plan. For example, Japanese gardens in general are created by arranging various rocks and trees so as to articulate their individual characteristics. This is often accomplished by juxtaposing materials of contrasting qualities for mutual enhancement, such as a vertical rock with a horizontal rock, or a smooth-textured rock with a rough-textured rock. Similarly, one of the techniques of composing haiku is to juxtapose disparate and unrelated objects, such as a tiny flower and a vast sky or a present phenomenon and an ancient event, in order to give rise to an ineffable atmosphere which would color the whole verse.13

The appreciation of the imperfect is based upon the same consideration of aesthetic contrast. That is, juxtaposing the opulent or the perfect with the impoverished or the imperfect facilitates mutual emphasis of each asset. This point is succinctly expressed in Shukō's verse: "A prize horse looks best hitched to a thatched hut."14 Accordingly, the exquisite painting of the white herons will not stand out if the framing scroll is equally gorgeous. Conversely, the aesthetic value of the irregularly shaped objects is enhanced by surroundings marked by regular patterns. Such a contrast can be found between the misshapen tea utensils and the geometrically shaped and regularly textured tatami mat, between one irregularly formed pillar and the straight, geometrical divisions of the rest of the tea hut interior, between the impoverished-looking tea hut and the adjacent august castle or luxurious residence.15 The aesthetic value of contrast underlies one of the instructions in a seventeenth-century tea manual: "as for the combination of the types of tea utensils ... a plain tea bowl of present-day porcelain should be combined with an exquisite antique piece of Chinese tea-caddy."16

This principle of contrast operates in imagination as well. Even in the absence of an actual object or phenomenon in a perfect, optimal condition, one can still appreciate the contrast between the perfect and the imperfect by imagining the former. Such was the explanation offered by Kenkō. The obscured moon, fallen cherry blossoms, and the end of a love affair, normally considered as falling short of the optimal condition, are much more interesting to the imagination than if they were at the height of their condition. "In all things, it is the beginnings and ends that are interesting," according to Kenkō, because they stimulate our imagination to either anticipate or to reminisce. Furthermore, "how incomparably lovely is the moon ... when seen through the tops of the cedars deep in the mountains, or when it hides for a moment behind clustering clouds during a sudden shower!" A view of something half-obscured in such a manner is much more alluring than when it is fully exposed.17

A similar reasoning can be given for the appreciation of the imperfect and the insufficient. A broken ware, for example, intrigues our imagination by making us wonder about the history behind the object: What was its optimal condition like? How did the damage occur? What aesthetic value was found in it by the tea master who decided to keep using it? A twentieth-century art critic, Yanagi Sōetsu, summarizes his attraction to "the irregular" as based upon the allure when "there is ... a little something left unaccounted for."18

One could question why these associations do not occur regarding objects and phenomena with optimal condition, such as cherry blossoms "in full bloom, the unobscured moon, and a perfectly shaped bowl with no damage. Theoretically it would be possible for us to imagine how it came to be, what it will be like if it is obscured or when it is past its prime, what kind of possible damage or aging effect it may accrue, and so on. However, it may be that since we normally expect and imagine objects and phenomena to be in their optimal condition, any deviation from that surprises us, stimulating our imagination and triggering curiosity.

There is a sense in which we not only expect and imagine objects in their optimal conditions but also yearn for them. Kenkō recognizes this tendency while advocating the appreciation of the imperfect, the obscured, and the insufficient:

People commonly regret that the cherry blossoms scatter or that the moon sinks in the sky, and this is natural; but only an exceptionally insensitive man would say, "This branch and that branch have lost their blossoms. There is nothing worth seeing now."19

A clearly viewed moon, cherry blossoms in their full glory, or the unblemished scroll are
easier to appreciate. Kenkō’s proposed aesthetics of imperfection and insufficiency can be regarded as a challenge to this common and prevalent taste.

The premise that the perfect and the opulent are easier to appreciate is also shared by Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), a noted philologist and literary critic. Norinaga, however, uses this premise to criticize the aesthetic sensibility advocated by Kenkō:

What that monk said does not accord with human feelings but is a fabricated aesthetic taste formed in the impertinent mind of a man of a later age and it is not a truly aesthetic taste. What that monk said can be described ... as contrived only to make what does not accord with human wishes a refined taste.20

If, as Norinaga insists (and Kenkō agrees), it is “natural” for humans to long for clarity and perfection, the aesthetics of imperfection transforms what otherwise would be a disappointing experience, such as of an obscured moon or a shabby-looking scroll, into a positive experience. The appreciation of the imperfect is then interpreted as an end product of a dialectic movement, a resolution to the disappointment or dissatisfaction in the ordinary context.

However, why challenge this “natural” aesthetic attraction and advocate what may be considered a subversive aesthetics? Was it merely to provide aesthetic contrast and stimulation to the imagination?

III. SOCIAL/PolITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is important to note that this aesthetic celebration of the imperfect and the insufficient presupposes not only the yearning for but also the attainability of the optimum condition, understood as a shiny mirror, a gorgeous and properly framed scroll, a meticulously maintained garden, and a perfectly formed vase. A cloudy mirror Sei Shōnagon appreciates is not a cheap or defective product; it was shiny once. A wild garden exalted by her did not result from the owner not being able to afford maintaining it; rather, it was a calculated neglect. Falling cherry blossoms are aesthetically superior to those in full bloom precisely because they had previously achieved the stage of full blossom. Chipped and cracked tea wares could be repaired. The impoverished-looking scroll does not imply an inability to choose opulent materials; it is a product of conscious design. Similarly, a flower vase missing one handle is not a result of failed creation.

These considerations make apparent that the appreciation of the imperfect was not merely directed toward the sensory qualities such as asymmetry, irregularity, or obscurity, or their contrast with the opposite qualities. These qualities are aesthetically appreciable precisely because their opposites are possible to achieve.

It is noteworthy that the proponents of this aesthetics of imperfection and insufficiency came from the position of social privilege and cultural sophistication. For example, Sei Shōnagon, born into a family of noted poets, belonged to the cultural elite of her time by serving an empress. Similarly, Kenkō, coming from a family of noted diviners serving emperors, tutored a young prince and enjoyed easy access to the nobility. With his knowledge of ancient court culture and religious teachings, as well as contemporary issues, Kenkō circulated among the aristocrats comfortably. His association with the nobility continued even after he “renounced the world” to lead the life of a Buddhist monk at the age of thirty, partly motivated by the decline of his patron family’s political fortune.21 Neither of them was underprivileged with no choice but to deal daily with simple materials, defective objects, and old, worn-out items. Rather, their privileged position afforded them the luxury of adopting a purely aesthetic attitude toward the signs of insufficiency and impoverishment.22

It is the art of the tea ceremony that added a political dimension to this aesthetics. Primarily wealthy merchants under generous patronage from shoguns, tea masters of the sixteenth century acted not only as aesthetic consultants to the shoguns but sometimes also as their political confidants. In particular, they cultivated and recommended the aesthetics of imperfection and insufficiency as their patrons became increasingly tempted to display their growing political power and wealth. For example, Rikyū severely criticized his patron shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s (1536–1598) gold-gilded tea hut, not only for its garish uncoyness but also for its political imprudence for possibly incurring the wrath of the underprivileged.23

In an effort to counterbalance such an osten-
tations display of their patrons’ power and wealth, the tea masters made the tea hut to emulate the humble, simple rusticity of a mountain hut. Specifically, the size of the hut became smaller, the height of the ceiling became lower to prevent the display of an expensive, long hanging scroll, and the interior became less finished by using unpolished wood, unpainted walls, or sometimes even mud walls. In addition, a symbolic gesture toward social egalitarianism was displayed in a low washbasin and an extremely small entrance to the tea hut, forcing all participants to literally lower themselves and the warriors to cast aside their long swords, a proud symbol of their status. The absence of a spatial center in the tea hut also eliminated the social hierarchy of seating the guests.

The aesthetics of imperfection and insufficiency promoted by the tea ceremony, however, went beyond merely restraining the ostentatious display of wealth and power. It also helped justify insufficiency and poverty through aestheticizing them. The most explicit expression concerning this political significance of the tea ceremony is found in an essay by a nineteenth-century statesman, Ii Naosuke (1815–1860), entitled “Essay on the Service of the Way of Tea to the Way of Government.” In it he emphasizes the political importance of the tea ceremony’s teaching regarding how to be satisfied with insufficiency. The aesthetic sensibility was thus utilized for instilling the virtue of being satisfied with and finding pleasure in one’s lot, no matter how imperfect and disappointing initially, a virtue considered crucial in maintaining stability in a hierarchical society.

The success of this aesthetic means of social control is not clear, as some critics saw through the promotion of this aesthetics to expose the social/political purpose behind it. For example, Dazai Shundai (1680–1747), a Confucian scholar, points out:

Whatever tea dilettantes do is a copy of the poor and humble. It may be that the rich and noble have a reason to find pleasure in copying the poor and humble. But why would those who are, from the outset, poor and humble find pleasure in further copying the poor and humble?

However, despite such criticism regarding its social/political implications, the philosophical/religious foundation of this aesthetics did function as a powerful means of justifying life in general for everyone, for the rich and powerful as well as for the poor and humble. To this philosophical dimension of this aesthetics we shall turn next.

IV. PHILOSOPHICAL/RELIGIOUS CONSIDERATIONS

In addition to the political dimension, there was also an important philosophical underpinning to this aesthetics of imperfection and insufficiency. The indigenous religious tradition of Japan, Shintoism, is noted for its affirmation and celebration of everything in this world, expressed in its nature worship. While not directly giving rise to the aesthetics of imperfection and insufficiency, Shintoism provides the spiritual foundation which encourages the appreciation of this life and this world.

The attitude toward affirmation of this world is further developed by Zen Buddhism, imported from China toward the end of twelfth century. It is Zen Buddhism that provides the most direct philosophical foundation for the aesthetics of imperfection and insufficiency. Except for Sei Shônagon, whose life predates the introduction of Zen Buddhism to Japan, the advocates of this aesthetics were either students or practitioners of Zen Buddhism.

One of the most important doctrines of Zen Buddhism is its thoroughgoing egalitarianism concerning the Buddha nature (understood roughly as the ultimate reality), which makes no value discrimination between various objects and activities. This view leads to the absolute affirmation of the facticity of everything existent. This egalitarian view is expressed repeatedly by Dogen (1200–1253), the founder of the Sôtô sect of Zen Buddhism and perhaps one of the most important figures in the history of Japanese thought. He identifies Buddha nature with grasses, trees, bushes, mountains, rivers, bricks, tiles, chairs, and ceremonial brushes, as well as body, mind, delusion, enlightenment, birth, and death. By far the most vivid examples he cites to illustrate this omnipresence of Buddha nature are “a donkey’s jaw,” “a horse’s mouth,” “the sound of breaking wind,” and “the smell of excrement”; in short, those objects and phenomena which are commonly shunned, neglected, or deprecated for being ignoble, vulgar, or unpleasant.
Hindrance to realizing the Buddha nature of everything whatsoever, including those unsavory objects and phenomena, is our ordinary experience of the world, which is facilitated by what Dōgen calls "the burden of self." Whether the viewpoint be egocentric, ethnocentric, present-minded, or anthropocentric, experiencing the world from a particular centrist position will prevent us from seeing into the reality of everything, describable only as "thus-ness," "suchness," or "being-suchness." Until we "learn to penetrate freely beyond these bounds," that is, bounds created by the burden of self, we "have not been liberated from the body and mind of ordinary people."29

One of the bounds to be overcome in Zen enlightenment is our "natural" tendency to appreciate the perfect, the opulent, and the gorgeous while being disappointed and dissatisfied with the opposite qualities. Our tendency to deprecate the imperfect and the insufficient is based upon our all-too-human perspective; in terms of ultimate reality, however, they are equally valuable for manifesting their own Buddha nature. Hence,

When we look at the moon and flowers, it is just the moon and flowers we should see, not some distorted picture created to conform to a preconceived idea. Experience spring as spring and autumn as autumn. Accept both the beauty and loneliness of both... Determination to see all things as they really are, free of preconceived ideas, results in emergence of true practice.30

Shunning academic discourses, Zen thinkers typically transmit their world view to the populace through aesthetic means. Specifically, the Zen commitment to thorough egalitarianism is embodied in the aesthetic elevation of the mundane and the ordinary, practiced in particular by the tea ceremony and haiku. The former elevates the so-called mundane activities such as washing hands, boiling water, and drinking tea to an artistic height, while the latter takes seemingly vulgar objects, such as urination of a horse, droppings of a warbler, fleas, and flies, as subject matters. The aesthetically worthwhile objects and activities are not limited to what is normally considered to be noble and elegant.

Similarly, this Zen egalitarianism raises the value of misshapen forms and impoverished appearances, qualities which are normally not appreciated. The challenge to find an aesthetic appeal in those things to which we do not normally feel attracted is also an invitation to experience the world from the Zen standpoint.

In one sense, this aesthetics of imperfection overcompensates for the commonplace devaluation of imperfection by purging from the aesthetic sphere that which is well formed, opulent, and gorgeous, creating an equally nonegalitarian view on aesthetic values. However, this overcompensation underscores the presupposition that the "natural" aesthetic tendency toward the perfect and the opulent is prevalent and deeply entrenched among people.31

The Zen foundation for the aesthetics of imperfection and insufficiency was not limited to its metaphysical consideration; it also encompassed an existential dimension. This aestheticization of what is normally considered disappointing and difficult to accept facilitates acceptance of the ultimate lot in life: the universal condition of transience, a great equalizer. One of the most important themes in Buddhism, as in many world traditions, concerns how to cope with the challenge of the transience of everything existent, particularly of human life. Early Japanese attempts to cope with this irrevocable fact of life ranged from resignation, finding analogue and solace in the evanescent aspects of nature, to seeking salvation in the other world, the Pure Land.32

Zen Buddhism introduces a positive celebration of transience, as perhaps most eloquently expressed by Kenkō:

If man were never to fade away like the dews of Adashino, never to vanish like the smoke over Toribeyama, but lingered on forever in the world, how things would lose their power to move us! The most precious thing in life is its uncertainty.33

This affirmation of transience receives an aesthetic support by the penchant for imperfection and insufficiency. Many examples of imperfection are drawn from appreciating the aging effects on the object. Chipped or broken objects evoke a history of being used, while faded, rusted, or aged appearance of lacquer ware, metalwork, and unpainted architectural interior suggest noble patina.34 A garden with a wild, neglected appearance also conjures up an image
of the passage of time. Instead of lamenting the fact that the object no longer exhibits the original, perfectly shaped, lustrously colored appearance, the aesthetics of imperfection elevates this fall from the graceful perfection to an even higher aesthetic plane by celebrating vicissitude and perishability.

Appreciating chips and cracks of the tea wares not due to aging but rather as a result of the firing process also encourages our acceptance of and submission to our condition in life. The art of pottery-making consists both of the potter’s manipulation of the material and of the factors beyond the potter’s control (such as the precise temperature of the fire, the exact response of the clay and glazing to the particular fire, etc.). The resultant product often exhibits unexpected colors, shape, and texture. In one sense, pottery embodies the potter’s partial surrender to the material and process. The accidental cracks and chips in the firing process thus reminds us of the fact that one cannot always manipulate and control events and processes in life. Furthermore, by not discarding the cracked tea bowl but rather by cherishing such an object, this submission of one’s ego to the natural process receives a positive aesthetic endorsement.

In this context, a problem arises concerning the aesthetic value of those objects which are designed to appear defective. That is, is not the aesthetic justification of transience and human powerlessness over natural process possible only when the signs for these are produced without any human control? Indeed, some critics adopt a purist position regarding this, questioning the value of those objects made to appear impoverished and defective. Yanagi, a contemporary commentator cited previously, for example, regards Korean peasants’ bowls superior to those Japanese tea wares which are made by tea connoisseurs to emulate the former. The difference between the two, according to him, is “between things born and things made.”

However, I do not believe that this purist predicament is necessary for the objects with imperfection to justify transience and human surrender to natural process. Consider the possibility of distinguishing, within intentional design activity, contrived design and spontaneous design. This distinction refers to the difference in the makers’ attitude. According to Zen aesthetics, artists are successful in their endeavor only when they overcome or transcend their immediate intentions concerning the design (such as to make a misshapen object). This is accomplished when they submit their ego to the materials and let these materials take a lead in designing or performing. Specifically, a master artist lets a form emerge from the given clay, assists trees and rocks to articulate their unique characteristics in a garden, listens to pines and bamboos in composing a haiku about them, and enables a spontaneous harmony to emerge from the interaction with tea ceremony guests. The product or activity executed in this manner, though not resulting from accidents or processes beyond human control, is said to embody spontaneity and freedom. Hence, even when designed to appear defective, it is possible for cracked tea bowls to invoke the attitude of acceptance of the forces and situations beyond human control. By celebrating the aesthetic value of such objects, human submission to and eventual affirmation of life with all its contingencies become aestheticized.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Many Japanese artistic activities both presuppose and encourage the artists’ listening to and submitting themselves to the voice and dictate of the material and subject matter, as well as affirming the various elements of accidents and surprises beyond their control. The attitude toward society, nature, and life as well as artistic work encouraged as virtuous is to acknowledge and accept the given condition in toto, even including their painful, difficult, or disappointing aspects, and to appreciate what is given. I have tried to argue in the preceding that the traditional Japanese means of nurturing this attitude was justifying the unpalatable in life and society through aestheticizing the imperfect and the insufficient.

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1. Needless to say, the concepts of imperfection and insufficiency are wholly dependent upon human expectations.
This point will be explored subsequently, particularly in the section on Zen Buddhism.


4. For the Japanese authors’ names, I will follow the custom of putting the first name last and the last name first, except when citing their writings published in English. I will also observe the Japanese custom by referring to classical authors by their personal names. For example, Yoshida Kenkō will hereafter be Kenkō.


6. Ibid., p. 70. Keene’s translation has “uniformity” instead of “uniformity and completeness” at the end of this passage. I added “completeness” here to capture the entire meaning of the original term: “koto to tono no toonitaru.”

7. For example, in one garden, cracks on various stone objects such as water basins are left unrepaired while in another garden the top of a stone lantern was intentionally chipped. There is even an explicit instruction for garden making which recommends that “if an old stone with moss is used (for a lantern), place it without cleaning the surface” and that “if it is damaged, it is fine, too.” Cited by Mori Osamu in Teien (Garden) (Tokyo: Kōdansha Shuppansha, 1984), my translation, pp. 135–136.


10. This incident is discussed in Kawata Tadachika, Chaki to Kaiseki (Tea Utensils and Tea Ceremony Cooking) (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1991), pp. 2738; and in Minamoto Toyo Mune, Nihon Bijutsushi Tankyū (Essays in Japanese Art History), vol. 6, pp. 421–430.

11. Namidoboku o Yomu, pp. 301. This incident is also discussed in Minamoto, pp. 425–426.

12. The quotation continues: “He will not die a normal death.” Indeed, Orie was ordered to commit suicide during a battle. Cited in Namidoboku o Yomu, p. 305 (my translation).


16. Sen no Rikyū in Iizasa, The Theory of Beauty, p. 146, emphases added. This passage continues: “Juku—although it was a time when every tea utensil to be used in tea parties was supposed to be of the taste of sumptuous exquisiteness—would present the tea-bowl of ido which he had cherished, avoiding a tea-bowl of tenmoku, wrapping the ido in a tea-bowl-pouch giving it the authenticity of a tenmoku.” Ido bowls are plain-looking bowls used by Korean peasants while tenmoku bowls are opulent-looking wares imported from China.


22. A contemporary architectural critic points out that this appreciation of impoverishment which presupposes affluence underlies not only the medieval aesthetics of imperfection but also the contemporary architecture of Tadao Andō. Andō’s residential architecture, which is characterized by raw concrete, is enjoyed by its residents for the coldness during winter and the leaking roof precisely because they can afford more comfort. Kuma Kengo, Jūtakuron: Essays on Ten Types of Dwelling) (Tokyo: Tōsō Shuppansha, 1989), pp. 119–127. It seems to me that the contemporary American craze over the “grungy” look in clothing also presupposes affluence.

23. For this incident, see Theodore M. Ludwig’s Chanoyu and Momoyama: Conflict and Transformation in Rikyū’s Art included in Tea in Japan, eds. Varley and Kumakura. This work also contains a color photograph of the modern replica of Hideyoshi’s golden tea room.

24. This continuous movement toward emulating impoverishment in a tea hut is recorded in Sen no Rikyū, Namidoboku, pp. 147–148.

25. For the symbolic expressions of social egalitarianism in the tea ceremony, see Iizasa, pp. 57–59. Similarly, one contemporary critic points out, “the tea ceremony was born out of astute political acumen and economic sensitivity among the wealthy merchants from Sakai. Paradoxically, precisely because of their wealth, they tended toward wabi tea. The tea hut, ‘the urban mountain hut’ was a thatched hut in the middle of a palace.” Kumakura Isao, Chanoyu no Rekishi (The History of Tea Ceremony) (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbunsha, 1991), p. 146. My translation. We should also note
the way in which the tea ceremony was used as a political vehicle in the extraordinary tea party hosted by Hideyoshi in 1587 held in the forest of Kitano. It was the largest tea party in which literally anyone, whether military attendants, townspeople, or farmers, was invited. For details of this gathering, see Isao Kumakura, “Sen no Rikyū” in *Tea in Japan.*


27. Dazai Shundai, Dokago (Solitary Words, 1816), cited by Minami, p. 90. I changed the translation of the last two sentences to be more faithful to the original. The translation reads: “The rich and noble, however, must have a reason to find pleasure in copying the poor and humble. Why should those who are, from the outset, poor and humble further copy the poor and humble and make fun of them?”

28. The specific examples of a donkey’s jaw and a horse’s mouth come from the chapter on Bushshō (Buddha Nature), the sound of breaking wind and the smell of excrement from the chapter on Gyōbutsu Igi (The Dignified Activities of Practicing Buddha) from Shobōgenzō: The Eye and Treasury of the True Law by Dōgen Zenji, translated by Kōsen Nishiyama (Tokyo: Nakayama Shobō, 1986).

29. The notion of “burden of self” is explored by Dōgen in the Chapter of Genjokkan (Issues at Hand) and the notions of bonds and liberation in the chapter of Sansuikyō (Scripture of Mountains and Waters), both taken from the Thomas Cleary translation, *Shobōgenzō: Zen Essays by Dōgen* (University of Hawaii Press, 1986).

30. From the chapter on Yubutsu Yobutsu (only a Buddha can transmit to a Buddha) in *Shobōgenzō.* Nishiyama translation.

31. The Zen emphasis on the aesthetic value of that which is not normally appreciated still pervades contemporary writings on this issue. Consider, for example, the discussion of the Buddhist beauty of imperfection by Yanagi Sōetsu. He claims that the beauty of the tea ceremony “cannot lie either in the perfect or the imperfect, but must lie in a realm where such distinctions have ceased to exist, where the imperfect is identified with the perfect.” However, in defining such a beauty as “irregular,” he fails to explain why transcending both regular and irregular or perfect and imperfect must always result in the irregular. Yanagi, p. 121.


33. Kenkō, p. 7. Michele Marra explains how aestheticizing transience carried a personal meaning to Kenkō, because his own life was greatly affected by the vicissitude of the political situation of his time. See his *Aesthetics of Discontent,* chap. 6.

34. Izuutsu claims that the aesthetics of imperfection developed in the tea ceremony accounts for the Japanese fascination with things such as “a weathered rock, a weathered and grainy piece of wood, a piece of old multi-colored brocade with its colors now faded and subdued, an ancient landmark now totally deserted soon to be effaced and go irreversibly into naught, etc.” (Izuutsu, p. 32). It is also recorded that Rikyū preferred short-lived flowers to long-lived flowers for decoration in a tea room. Kumakura, *Chano no Reiki,* p. 230.

35. This aspect of pottery making is explored in a dialogue between the fifteenth generation of the Raku Family (a noted pottery-making family in Kyoto) and Shōichi Kōdō, an art critic, recorded in a film entitled *Japan Spirit and Form: the Cosmos in the Hand,* directed by Yuichi Funakoshi, NHK, 1989.


37. One of the most important design principles for making a Japanese garden has traditionally been the rule of “Kowan ni Shigōgu,” satisfying the request of the objects. This means that the garden master arranges rocks or prunes trees in such a way as to articulate and enhance the unique characteristics of individual objects. In composing a haiku, Master Bashō (1644–1694) claims that “when we observe calmly, we discover that all things have their fulfillment”; hence, we must “learn from a pine things about a pine, and from a bamboo things about a bamboo.” Cited by Makoto Ueda in “Bashō and the Poetics of Haiku,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 21 (1963): 424. With respect to creating a harmonious atmosphere in the tea ceremony, Rikyū repeatedly stresses the importance of letting such a harmony between the host and the guests emerge spontaneously without forcing to create it (Nambōsoku o Yoru, pp. 21, 256, and 350).

38. My discussion suggests at least two areas of comparative study for further inquiry. One is a comparison between this Japanese aesthetics and the eighteenth-century British cult of the picturesque. There are several points of similarity between the two: the celebration of obscurity, agedness, irregularity; the creation of an aesthetic value through iconoclastic acts (as in partially destroying the perfect facade of a Palladian edifice to make it picturesque, described by William Gilpin); the emphasis on the stimulation to the imagination through association of ideas; fascination with the passage of time as exemplified by the picturesque cult of ruins; and the wealth and social privilege enjoyed by the advocates of the picturesque.

Another comparison can be made between the Japanese means of justifying every aspect of one’s life through aestheticization (particularly of those aspects which are difficult to accept) and Friedrich Nietzsche’s aesthetic justification of life. He develops a way of coping with life’s contingencies by saying “yes” to everything, thereby creating an artwork out of one’s life as an organic whole in which nothing can be missing and everything has to be exactly the way it is. Both propose a total affirmation of what exists and happens through aesthetic means.