

ÆSTHETIC CHARACTERISTICS

IN certain directions, the Japanese reveal a development of æsthetic taste which no other nation has reached. The general appreciation of landscape-views well illustrates this point. The home and garden of the average workman are far superior artistically to those of the same class in the West. There is hardly a home without at least a diminutive garden laid out in artistic style with miniature lake and hills and winding walks. And this garden exists solely for the delight of the eye.

The general taste displayed in many little ways is a constant delight to the Western "barbarian" when he first comes to Japan. Nor does this delight vanish with time and familiarity, though it is tempered by a later perception of certain other features. Indeed, the more one knows of the details of their artistic taste, the more does he appreciate it. The "toko-no-ma," for example, is a variety of alcove usually occupying half of one side of a room. It indicates the place of honor, and guests are always urged to sit in front of it. The floor of the "toko-no-ma" is raised four or five inches above the level of the room and should never be stepped upon. In this "toko-no-ma" is usually placed some work of art, or a vase with flowers, and on the wall is hung a picture or a few Chinese characters, written by some famous calligraphist, which are changed with the seasons. The woodwork and the coloring of this part of the room is of the choicest. The "toko-no-ma" of the main room of the house is always restful to the eye; this "honorable spot" is found in at least one room in every house; and if the owner has moderate means, there are two or three such rooms. Only the homes of the poorest of the poor are without this ornament.

The Japanese show a refined taste in the coloring and decoration of rooms; natural woods, painted and polished, are common; every post and board standing erect must stand in the position in which it grew. A Japanese knows at once whether a board or post is upside down, though it would often puzzle a Westerner to decide the matter. The natural wood ceilings and the soft yellows and blues of the walls are all that the best trained Occidental eye could ask. Dainty decorations called the "ramma," over the neat "fusuma," consist of delicate shapes and quaint designs cut in thin boards, and serve at once as picture and ventilator. The drawings, too, on the "fusuma" (solid thick paper sliding doors separating adjacent rooms or shutting off the closet) are simple and neat, as is all Japanese pictorial art.

Japanese love for flowers reveals a high æsthetic development. Not only are there various flower festivals at which times the people flock to suburban gardens and parks, but sprays, budding branches, and even large boughs are invariably arranged in the homes and public halls. Every church has an immense vase for the purpose. The proper arrangement of flowers and of flowering sprays and boughs is a highly developed art. It is often one of the required studies in girls' schools. I have known two or three men who made their entire living by teaching this art. Miniature flowering trees are reared with consummate skill. An acquaintance of mine glories in 230 varieties of the plum tree, all in pots, some of them between two and three hundred years old. Shinto and Buddhist temples also reveal artistic qualities most pleasing to the eye.

But the main point of our interest lies in the explanation of this characteristic. Is the æsthetic sense more highly developed in Japan than in the West? Is it more general? Is it a matter of inherent nature, or of civilization?

In trying to meet these problems, I note, first of all, that the development of the Japanese æsthetic taste is one-sided; though advanced in certain respects it is belated in others. In illustration is the sense of smell. It will not do to say that "the Japanese have no use for the

nose," and that the love of sweet smells is unknown. Sir Rutherford Alcock's off-quoted sentence that "in one of the most beautiful and fertile countries in the whole world the flowers have no scent, the birds no song, and the fruit and vegetables no flavor," is quite misleading, for it has only enough truth to make it the more deceptive. It is true that the cherry blossom has little or no odor, and that its beauty lies in its exquisite coloring and abounding luxuriance, but most of the native flowers are praised and prized by the Japanese for their odors, as well as for their colors, as the plum, the chrysanthemum, the lotus, and the rose. The fragrance of flowers is a frequent theme in Japanese poetry. Japanese ladies, like those of every land, are fond of delicate scents. Cologne and kindred wares find wide sale in Japan, and I am told that expensive musk is not infrequently packed away with the clothing of the wealthy.

But in contrast to this appreciation is a remarkable indifference to certain foul odors. It is amazing what horrid smells the cultivated Japanese will endure in his home. What we conceal in the rear and out of the way, he very commonly places in the front yard; though this is, of course, more true of the country than of large towns or cities. It would seem as if a high æsthetic development should long ago have banished such sights and smells. As a matter of fact, however, the æsthetics of the subject does not seem to have entered the national mind, any more than have the hygienics of the same subject.

In explanation of these facts, may it not be that the Japanese method of agriculture has been a potent hindrance to the æsthetic development of the sense of smell? In primitive times, when wealth was small, the only easy method which the people had of preserving the fertilizing properties of that which is removed from our cities by the sewer-system was such as we still find in use in Japan to-day. Perhaps the necessities of the case have toughened the mental, if not the physical, sense of the people. Perhaps the unæsthetic character of the sights and smells has been submerged in the great value of fertilizing materials. Then, too, with the Occidental,

the thought is common that such odors are indications of seriously unhealthful conditions. We are accordingly offended not simply by the odor itself, but also by the associations of sickness and death which it suggests. Not so the unsophisticated Oriental. Such a correlation of ideas is only now arising in Japan, and changes are beginning to be made, as a consequence.

I cannot leave this point without drawing attention to the fact that the development of the sense of smell in these directions is relatively recent, even in the West. Of all the non-European nations and races, I have no doubt Japan is most free from horrid smells and putrid odors. And in view of our own recent emancipation it is not for us to marvel that others have made little progress. Rather is it marvelous that we should so easily forget the hole from which we have been so recently dug.

In turning to study certain features of Japanese pictorial art, we notice that a leading characteristic is that of simplicity. The greatest results are secured with the fewest possible strokes. This general feature is in part due to the character of the instrument used, the "fude," "brush." This same brush answers for writing. It admits of strong, bold outlines; and a large brush allows the exhibition of no slight degree of skill. As a result, "writing" is a fine art in Japan. Hardly a family that makes any pretense at culture but owns one or more framed specimens of writing. In Japan these rank as pictures do or mottoes in the West, and are prized not merely for the sentiment expressed, but also for the skill displayed in the use of the brush. Skillful writers become famous, often receiving large sums for small "pictures" which consist of but two or three Chinese characters.

No doubt the higher development of appreciation for natural scenery among the people in general is largely due to the character of the scenery itself. Steep hills and narrow valleys adjoin nearly every city in the land. Seas, bays, lakes, and rivers are numerous; reflected mountain scenes are common; the colors are varied and marked. Flowering trees of striking beauty are abun-

dant. Any people living under these physical conditions, and sufficiently advanced in civilization to have leisure and culture, can hardly fail to be impressed with such wealth of beauty in the scenery itself.

In the artistic reproduction of this scenery, however, Japanese artists are generally supposed to be inferior to those of the West:

As often remarked, Japanese art has directed its chief endeavor to animals and to nature, thus failing to give to man his share of attention. This curious one-sidedness shows itself particularly in painting and in sculpture. In the former, when human beings are the subject, the aim has apparently been to extol certain characteristics; in warriors, the military or heroic spirit; in wise men, their wisdom; in monks and priests, their mastery over the passions and complete attainment of peace; in a god, the moral character which he is supposed to represent. Art has consequently been directed to bringing into prominence certain ideal features which must be over-accentuated in order to secure recognition; caricatures, rather than lifelike forms, are the frequent results. The images of multitudes of gods are frightful to behold; the aim being to show the character of the emotion of the god in the presence of evil. These idols are easily misunderstood, for we argue that the more frightful he is, the more vicious must be the god in his real character; not so the Oriental. To him the more frightful the image, the more noble the character. Really evil gods, such as demons, are always represented, I think, as deformed creatures, partly human and partly beast. It is to be remembered, in this connection, that idols are an imported feature of Japanese religion; Shinto to this day has no "graven image." All idols are Buddhistic. Moreover, they are but copies of the hideous idols of India; the Japanese artistic genius has added nothing to their grotesque appearance. But the point of interest for us is that the æsthetic taste which can revel in flowers and natural scenery has never delivered Japanese art from truly unæsthetic representations of human beings and of gods.

Standing recently before a toy store and looking at

the numberless dolls offered for sale, I was impressed afresh with the lack of taste displayed, both in coloring and in form; their conventionality was exceedingly tiresome; their one attractive feature was their absurdity. But the moment I turned away from the imitations of human beings to look at the imitations of nature, the whole impression was changed. I was pleased with the artistic taste displayed in the perfectly imitated, delicately colored flowers. They were beautiful indeed.

Why has Japanese art made so little of man as man? Is it due to the "impersonality" of the Orient, as urged by some? This suggests, but does not give, the correct interpretation of the phenomenon in question. The reason lies in the nature of the ruling ideas of Oriental civilization. Man, as man, has not been honored or highly esteemed. As a warrior he has been honored; consequently, when pictured or sculptured as a warrior, he has worn his armor; his face, if visible, is not the natural face of a man, but rather that of a passionate victor, slaying his foe or planning for the same. And so with the priests and the teachers, the emperors and the generals; all have been depicted, not for what they are in themselves, but for the rank which they have attained; they are accordingly represented with their accouterments and robes and the characteristic attitudes of their rank. The effort to preserve their actual appearance is relatively rare. Manhood and womanhood, apart from social rank, have hardly been recognized, much less extolled by art. This feature, then, corresponds to the nature of the Japanese social order. The art of a land necessarily reveals the ruling ideals of its civilization. As Japan failed to discover the inherent nature and value of manhood and womanhood, estimating them only on a utilitarian basis, so has her art reflected this failure.

Apparently it has never attempted to depict the nude human form. This is partly explained, perhaps, by the fact that the development of a perfect physical form through exercise and training has not been a part of Oriental thought. Labor of every sort has been regarded as degrading. Training for military skill and prowess has indeed been common among the military

classes; but the skill and strength themselves have been the objects of thought, rather than the beauty of the muscular development which they produce. When we recall the prominent place which the games of Greece took in her civilization previous to her development of art, and the stress then laid on perfect bodily form, we shall better understand why there should be such difference in the development of the art of these two lands. I have never seen a Japanese man or youth bare his arm to show with pride the development of his biceps; and so far as I have observed, the pride which students in the United States feel over well-developed calves has no counterpart in Japan—this, despite the fact that the average Japanese has calves which would turn the American youth green with envy.

From the absence of the nude in Japanese art it has been urged that Japan herself is far more morally pure than the West. Did the moral life of the people correspond to their art in this respect, the argument would have force. Unfortunately, such does not seem to be the case. It is further suggested as a reason that the bodily form of Oriental peoples is essentially unæsthetic; that the men are either too fat or too lean, and the women too plump when in the bloom of youth and too wrinkled and flabby when the first bloom is over. The absurdity of this suggestion raises a smile, and a query as to the experience which its author must have had. For any person who has lived in Japan must have seen individuals of both sexes, whom the most fastidious painter or sculptor would rejoice to secure as models.

It might be thought that a truly artistic people, who are also somewhat immoral, would have developed much skill in the portrayal of the nude female form. But such an attempt does not seem to have been made until recent times, and in imitation of Western art. At least such attempts have not been recognized as art nor have they been preserved as such. I have never seen either statue or picture of a nude Japanese woman. Even the pictures of famous prostitutes are always faultlessly attired. The number and size of the conventional hairpins, and the gaudy coloring of the clothing, alone

indicate the immoral character of the woman represented.

It is not to be inferred, however, that immoral pictures have been unknown in Japan, for the reverse is true. Until forcibly suppressed by the government under the incentive of Western criticism, there was perfect freedom to produce and sell licentious and lascivious pictures. The older foreign residents in Japan testify to the frequency with which immoral scenes were depicted and exposed for sale. Here I merely say that these were not considered works of art; they were reproduced not in the interests of the æsthetic sense, but wholly to stimulate the taste for immoral things.

The absence of the nude from Japanese art is due to the same causes that led to the relative absence of all distinctively human nature from art. Manhood and womanhood, as such, were not the themes they strove to depict.

A curious feature of the artistic taste of the people is the marked fondness for caricature. It revels in absurd accentuations of special features. Children with protruding foreheads; enormously fat little men; grotesque dwarf figures in laughable positions; these are a few common examples. Nearly all of the small drawings and sculpturings of human figures are intentionally grotesque. But the Japanese love of the grotesque is not confined to its manifestation in art. It also reveals itself in other surprising ways. It is difficult to realize that a people who revel in the beauties of nature can also delight in deformed nature; yet such is the case. Stunted and dwarfed trees, trees whose branches have been distorted into shapes and proportions that nature would scorn—these are sights that the Japanese seem to enjoy, as well as "natural" nature. Throughout the land, in the gardens of the middle and higher classes, may be found specimens of dwarfed and stunted trees which have required decades to raise. The branches, too, of most garden shrubs and trees are trimmed in fantastic shapes. What is the charm in these distortions? First, perhaps, the universal human interest in anything requiring skill. Think of the patience and per-

sistence and experimentation necessary to rear a dwarf pear tree twelve or fifteen inches high, growing its full number of years and bearing full-size fruit in its season! And second is the no less universal human interest in the strange and abnormal. All primitive people have this interest. It shows itself in their religions. Abnormal stones are often objects of religious devotion. Although I cannot affirm that such objects are worshiped in Japan to-day, yet I can say that they are frequently set up in temple grounds and dedicated with suitable inscriptions. Where nature can be made to produce the abnormal, there the interest is still greater. It is a living miracle. Witness the cocks of Tosa, distinguished by their two or three tail feathers reaching the extraordinary length of ten or even fifteen feet, the product of ages of special breeding.

According to the ordinary use of the term, *æsthetics* has to do with art alone. Yet it also has intimate relations with both speech and conduct. Poetry depends for its very existence on *æsthetic* considerations. Although little conscious regard is paid to *æsthetic* claims in ordinary conversation, yet people of culture do, as a matter of fact, pay it much unconscious attention. In conduct too, *æsthetic* ideas are often more dominant than we suppose. The objection of the cultured to the ways of the boorish rests on *æsthetic* grounds. This is true in every land. In the matter of conduct it is sometimes hard to draw the line between *æsthetics* and ethics, for they shade imperceptibly into one another; so much so that they are seen to be complementary rather than contradictory. Though it is doubtless true that conduct *æsthetically* defective may not be defective ethically, still is it not quite as true that conduct bad from the ethical is bad also from the *æsthetic* standpoint?

In no land have *æsthetic* considerations had more force in molding both speech and conduct than in Japan. Not a sentence is uttered by a Japanese but has the characteristic marks of *æstheticism* woven into its very structure. By means of "honorifics" it is seldom necessary for a speaker to be so pointedly vulgar as even to mention self. There are few points in the language so

difficult for a foreigner to master, whether in speaking himself, or in listening to others, as the use of these honorific words. The most delicate shades of courtesy and discourtesy may be expressed by them. Some writers have attributed the relative absence of the personal pronouns from the language to the dominating force of impersonal pantheism. I am unable to take this view for reasons stated in the later chapters on personality.

Though the honorific characteristics of the language seem to indicate a high degree of *æsthetic* development, a certain lack of delicacy in referring to subjects that are ruled out of conversation by cultivated people in the West make the contrary impression upon the uninitiated. Such language in Japan cannot be counted impure, for no such idea accompanies the words. They must be described simply as *æsthetically* defective. Far be it from me to imply that there is no impure conversation in Japan. I only say that the particular usages to which I refer are not necessarily a proof of moral tendency. A realistic baldness prevails that makes no effort to conceal even that which is in its nature unpleasant and un*æsthetic*. A spade is called a spade without the slightest hesitation. Of course specific illustrations of such a point as this are out of place. *Æsthetic* considerations forbid.

And how explain these un*æsthetic* phenomena? By the fact that Japan has long remained in a state of primitive development. Speech is but the verbal expression of life. Every primitive society is characterized by a bald literalism shocking to the *æsthetic* sense of societies which represent a higher stage of culture. In Japan, until recently, little effort has been made to keep out of sight objects and acts which we of the West have considered disagreeable and repulsive. Language alters more slowly than acts. Laws are making changes in the latter, and they in time will take effect in the former. But many decades will doubtless pass before the cultivated classes of Japan will reach, in this respect, the standard of the corresponding classes of the West.

As for the *æsthetics* of conduct in Japan, enough is in-