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Beauty through Japanese Eyes

The Tale of Genji as a Window to Japan–Part 1

Can Japanese art move one to worship God? As a musician-artist, I long to see my own heart and the hearts of my fellow Japanese moved to worship through the art of this great culture. *The Tale of Genji*, one of the most famous works of Japanese literature in the world, shows us what Japanese consider beautiful. Perhaps things Japan considers beautiful are also part of God's story. Perhaps I could see the gospel with fresh eyes and get excited about God from a Japanese perspective. Perhaps *The Tale of Genji* could reveal to me what might even attract Japanese to the God of the Bible. Motivated by these thoughts, I opened the most famous Japanese book.

The Tale of Genji created a sensation not only when written but has continued to inspire artists in every generation since. Movies, anime, manga, music, paintings, poetry, plays, dance, novels, theater, and opera have all been inspired by this story. The 2000 yen banknote even features a scene from the novel. Written over 1,000 years ago, the book reflects Japanese sensibilities to a depth I am just beginning to understand. It is common for high school students to write essays on why *The Tale of Genji* is the foundation of Japanese literature. When novelist Yasunari Kawabata gave his acceptance speech upon receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1968, he cited *The Tale of Genji* as "the highest pinnacle of Japanese literature. Even down to our day there has not been a piece of fiction to compare with it."

The Tale of Genji was way ahead of its time, becoming the first full-length piece of fictional literature in the history of the world. It is a story of political intrigue that threatens to undo a nation, and yet deals deeply and honestly with the consequences of the sin of immorality and betrayal. Genji's moral culpability even leads, in the end, to his ultimate despair. Japanese artists continue to look to Genji for inspiration

and foundation, especially as Japan struggles with its own cultural identity amidst rapidly changing times.

In this article, I'd like to look at two aspects of beauty from *The Tale of Genji* that have impacted my own meditation and I pray will impact my Japanese friends to worship the true God of beauty.

Beauty in Sadness

"…The dew that will fall when the hagi branch is bent, the speck of frost that will melt when it is lifted from the bamboo leaf…"
—Chapter 2 "The Broom Tree"

What is beautiful about this image? By a mere touch, brightly glittering dewdrops fall to the ground and are no more…and intricate patterns of frost dissolve into nothing. The lingering thought "That was beautiful!" encapsulates *mono no aware*.

Mono no aware, originally conceived by a literary critic to describe *The Tale of Genji*, captures the essence of the Japanese aesthetic of beauty. Roughly translated as the "sorrow of things" or the "grief of things," *mono no aware* is a strong emotion in the face of fleeting beauty in nature. William J. Puette, in his guide to *The Tale of Genji*, suggests this sentiment arose from

the sharp contrast between Shintoism and Buddhism. The worship of beauty in nature and the shunning of nature as a transient thing produced a unique sensibility to beauty and sadness in Japan.

Kaori Honma, a Japanese artist working in London, skillfully brought this to life in her work *A Problem of Annihilation.* After creating a full-sized baby grand piano out of paper, she then proceeded to light it on fire. After weeks of preparation and construction, the flames reduced the piano to ashes in mere minutes. In describing this work, Mrs. Honma quoted a poem by Kobayashi Issa on the death of his daughter in the early 1800's:

露の世は
露の世ながら
さりながら

The world is but a drop of dew,
A drop of dew,
And yet and yet…

The burning piano and the fragile drop of dew both pull at our senses, vividly reminding us that beauty in this world is always mixed with bitterness, death, and fragility.

Cherry blossoms perhaps best embody the concept of *mono no aware*. Even the colors themselves seem to defy description. Are they white-pink? Are they pink-white?

These nebulous clouds of blossoms burst into being overnight, but practically disappear at the first sign of rain or wind. No wonder cherry blossoms have come to symbolize the transitory nature of life. My first cherry blossom season in Japan hardly lasted two days! Their extreme magnificence and quick death stir our emotions.

In the West, intellectual ideals of mathematically correct proportions have shaped foundations of beauty since ancient Greece through thinkers as Pythagoras, Plato, Augustine, Leonardo da Vinci (think of the perfectly proportioned Vitruvian man!) and many others. Not so in Japan, where truths are felt rather than mathematically determined.

Take for example the Buddhist monk Kamo no Chomei and his famous work "The Ten-Foot Square Hut" from the 13th century. It opens with a description of the fleeting nature of this world:

"Ceaselessly the river flows, and yet the water is never the same,

while in the still pools the shifting foam gathers and is gone,

never staying for a moment..."

The water in the river is always changing. Japanese feel the transience of life in the flowing of the river and regret its passing away.

Described as capturing "the very soul of Japan," Matsuo Basho's evokes similar emotions in his poetry in *The Narrow Path to the Interior.* Like a flowing river, Basho wanders Japan capturing moments of aesthetic experience like this poem about the transience of human life:

夏草や
兵どもが
夢の跡

The summer grass
All that is left
Of ancient warriors' dreams

Beauty is not the short-lived nature itself but in the feeling evoked by it. Genji, "the Shining Prince," dies two thirds of the way through *The Tale of Genji*, creating a feeling for the whole last third of the book that great beauty and goodness in the world have been lost. The story also seems to end with a "…" suggesting a trend that continues to the current day. We too, kicked out of Eden, live in a world that is fallen, a paradise lost.

Edward G. Seidensticker, the great bearded man known for his English translations of Japanese

classic novels, summarized *The Tale of Genji* in just a few words as "the good days are in the past" and Nobel Prize-winning novelist Yasunari Kawabata labeled it "sadness at the end of glory." The sadness and loss in the book contribute to its incredible evocative power. Selections from the end of Genji's life are vividly reminiscent of King Solomon as recorded in Ecclesiastes:

"Genji's tears flowed on. He thought back over his life. Even the face he saw in the mirror had seemed to single him out for unusual honors, but there had very early been signs that the Blessed One meant him more than others to know the sadness and evanescence of things."
—Chapter 40 "Minori" (Buddhist law that all things pass)

"'I have always had everything,' he said to them. 'That was the station in life I was born to. Yet it has always seemed that I was meant for sad things too. I have often wondered whether the Blessed One was not determined to make me see more than others what a useless, insubstantial world it is.'"
—Chapter 41 "Maboroshi" (Illusion)

Genji dies a broken man at the end of Chapter 41. Born the son of the Emperor, he dies in despair. Moved by the death of this "Shining Prince," I can't but help think of the greatest "Man of Sorrows," the son of the emperor of all emperors, king of all kings, who also died completely alone in the end. If we move too quickly to the resurrection of Jesus, we miss the power and beauty of the image. Just as Jesus wept at the death of his friend Lazarus minutes before raising him from the dead, so we too can find deep heartfelt *mono no aware* in Jesus' suffering. Perhaps the Japanese heart can teach us how to feel the journey of our Savior in a renewed way.

Beauty in Contrast

Junichiro Tanizaki, one translator of *The Tale of Genji* into modern Japanese, wrote "we find beauty not in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness, that one thing against another creates." Contrast lies at the heart of Japanese beauty. In America, a vase full of flowers is usually thought to be the most beautiful arrangement of flowers. But in Japan, through the tradition of ikebana, beauty is portrayed through only a few flowers in order to create stark contrasts of stillness and movement, darkness and light, life and death. Contrasts are also important in seventeen-syllable Japanese haiku poems.

"Their hair, far longer than their gowns, stood out strikingly against the white of the snow."
—Chapter 20 "The Bluebell"

"Contrasting in the oddest manner with the rest of her complexion which was of a whiteness that would have put snow to shame."
—Chapter 6 "The Saffron Flower"

"Frozen into ice, water caught among the rocks can no longer flow,
And it is the brilliant moon that soars freely through the sky."
—Chapter 20 "The Bluebell"

Over three hundred years ago, Takarai Kikaku wrote this haiku:

名月や
畳の上に
松の影

The full harvest moon
On the tatami mats
A pine tree's shadow

The heavenly contrasts with the earthly. The brightness of the moon emphasizes the crisp darkness of the pine tree's shadow. The shadow gently moves, compared with the stillness of the tatami mats.

The harvest moon, signifying autumn, further hints at the contrast between the cooler air outside and the warmer air inside. The poem beautifully captures one moment in time and urges us to meditate on our relationship to the world around us.

The most famous haiku of all time was written by Kikaku's teacher, Matsuo Basho:

古池や
かはづ飛びこむ
水のおと

By the old pond
A frog leaps
The sound of water

Imagine sitting by an old pond deep in thought. All is silent. Suddenly, a splash comes from the water and you notice the pond and the frog. The contrast of sound and silence, the young frog and the ancient pond, makes this poem so vivid. The sudden realization of the contrasts makes one feel alive. A sense of awe comes at this awakening to the life and beauty in the surroundings.

Yasunari Kawabata received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1968 "for his narrative mastery, which with great sensibility expresses the essence of the Japanese mind." His most famous novel, *Snow Country,* overflows with descriptions not unlike those you find in *The Tale of Genji*:

"The quiet sound of the freezing snow over the land seemed to roar deep into the earth."

The contrasts of "quiet" with "roaring" and the surface of the land with the deepness of the earth bring this landscape to life. In another example, Shimamura, the main character in the book, gazes at the intense beauty of a girl, whose

bright red cheeks stand out clearly and sharply against the bright white of the snow:

"Shimamura glanced up at her, and immediately lowered his head. The white in the depths of the mirror was the snow, and floating in the middle of it were the woman's bright red cheeks. There was an indescribably fresh beauty in the contrast."

Seeing these contrasts in Japanese art, I began to be overwhelmed by the contrasts in the gospel. We are dead. God is alive. We are broken. God is perfect and whole. What could be more beautiful than Jesus' light shining into the darkness of Christmas night? What could be more beautiful than life for humanity coming out of the death of the Son of the God? In Jesus, we find the unraveled woven together, strength coming out of weakness, victory coming from defeat, and rescue beyond all hope.

The contrast of "Word" and "flesh" as Word and flesh became one (John 1:14) was portrayed artisticallyin the ark of the covenant. Gold contrasted with wood. Divinity contrasted with humanity. Two materials, one ark. Two natures, one person. The God-man. Immortal becoming mortal. A king being born in a barn. The All-powerful becoming a helpless baby.

The sheer power of these contrasts urges my heart to worship Him. Perhaps I won't be the only one moved to worship; perhaps the Japanese heart can also see the Author of Beauty through the beauty of their own culture. If we let it, the beauty in sadness and in contrasts can make us better worshippers. May it also make us better communicators of His greatness and beauty to this nation. JH