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JAPN 215: Cool Japan Today

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Q1. It should be no surprise that if one wishes to learn about a culture's aesthetic sense and value system that one only needs to look at the art created by individuals deeply immersed within it.

Although members that were from the noble classes of medieval Japan are without a doubt some of the more widely known for their influence on Japanese literature (e.g. Tale of Genji, The Pillow Book), as a personal preference, I find the art forms that were more widely accessible to members of all social classes such as Ikebana and Ukiyo-e, much more pleasing in terms of their aesthetic value, due to their focus on artistic elements associated with a common Japanese ethos. Each of the previously mentioned art forms are distinct from one another, but I believe it is this common ethos that ties them all together in a way that allows them to be still enjoyed to this day.

It certainly is not a smart idea to impose one's native culture's customs on another, yet before looking past the surface of Ikebana, I thought that the practice was simply for personal pleasure and vanity, as I have observed in my neighbor's gardening practices. I also assumed that Ikebana community is largely composed by women. My assumption has not been proven wrong per se, but the very practice does not specify that the practitioner should preferably be a woman. In fact, the very elements that attract so many individuals to this practice has little to do with comradery and very much to do with the philosophical underpinnings of the discipline, and how that relates Japanese aesthetic sense of beauty and its accompanying value system, which should go without saying, is appealing and open to anyone who share's these values.

One of the values that makes this discipline so attractive is the appreciation of a transient sense of beauty. In the case of any living thing, it's longevity is limited by physiological forces. And for plants chosen to be used in an Ikebana display, their stem is cut so that they may die. Focusing on this kind of harsh subject might not be for everyone, considering that it can be

viewed from a negative light; however, when viewed from a Japanese aesthetic perspective, it is this limited period that is valued the most. Someone creating the arrangement does not have unlimited time to arrange a display, to plan every detail, to dilly dally. However, under this kind of pressure, those that's abilities can bloom in this moment and bring out the best of their display, have tipped into a way of thinking often emphasized in Buddhist teachings: living life fully by allowing oneself to become empty. In short, this practice is a way to not only express how beautiful a fleeting life, feeling, or state is, but it is also a way of appreciating this life itself by implementing these philosophies through active practice.

The genre of Ukiyo-e departs from the previous two art forms in that it covers far more ground in its subject matter, as demonstrated through examples provided and explained by Chikaomi Takashi during his lecture on the Ukiyo-e genre. The fact that it covers such a wide range of subjects, (scenery, mythology, pin-ups, and portraits to name a few), and that it was so widely accessible to members of a variety of Japanese social classes, that this was one of the first times in Japanese history that individuals could freely experience art in a way that was tailored to their own interest. For the traveler, different perspectives of Fuji by Kokusai, for those interested in Kabuki, portraits by Sharaku, and for those interested in a variety of surreal art design, works by Kuniyoshi. In other words, I believe the wide accessibility of Ukiyo-e was the impetus for the advent of Japanese pop culture. To reinforce this point further, the Ukiyo-e genre can be seen as the precursor to what it is widely known as contemporary Japanese animation, a cultural product consumed widely by Japanese and international audiences alike that is highly experimental in its subject matter in the same way that Ukiyo-e is. With this being said, Ukiyo-e is not only a means by which Japanese audiences were able to freely experiment with their own artistic

preferences, but a way for them, as well as for international audiences, to freely experiment with the idea of what it meant to be Japanese.

Q2. Post WW2 Japanese pop culture when looked at from a superficial glance has a remarkably different visage than that of its predecessors from previous periods, but still retains some distinctly Japanese themes that have withstood the transition between eras, such as the appreciation of feminine beauty and the awe for Mt Fuji. There was an entire genre of Ukiyo-e block prints known as Bijinga, and now we have a more modern, although more unrealistic, portrayal of ideal femininity existing in the genre of Japanese animation.

As far as body image is concerned, a thin angular figure in both face and frame has persisted as being ideal, but long flowing hair is not the only the only sought after style for the contemporary image, which can be interpreted from the figures of Japanese women portrayed in Bijinga and Paprika's (from the Japanese animated film *Paprika*) character design. If we also play close attention to the character design of paprika, we may notice highly gendered personality traits such as coyness, that are highly sought after in women, one's that also can be interpreted from facial cues and gestures noticeable within Bijinga.

In keeping with Japanese tradition, Mt. Fuji, as explained by Takashi, has been a source of holiness, a monument representing the awesomeness of nature itself, and a symbol that is widely viewable (literally) by those living from various areas of Japan. The creation of fujiko (miniature hill sights that represent the real mount fuji are keeping in line with the tradition of making the pilgrimage climb of mount Fuji, while also taking into account the appealing convenience that someone of a more modern, secular Japanese mindset may have. However, as

evidenced by the efforts of the famous Japanese photographer Konyo to capture Mt. Fuji in his art from ever changing, always beautiful angles.

Q3. Before taking JAPN 215, I had never heard of the native Japanese genre Ukiyo-e, nor did I have any real interest in studying an art form further; however, there are a few artistic elements that I found present in the genre, that when considered in combination with one another, provide the foundation for an aesthetically unique, rather surreal art form. Because of this, I plan on researching the Ukiyo-e museums located in Tokyo in preparation for my trip to Japan this summer.