The Formal Representations of Aesthetics of Nature in Japan

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1 Introduction

As a Japanese aesthetics that centers round the concept of “being one with the nature,” wabi-sabi (侘び寂び) is well known for the pursuit of simplicity, which refers to keeping natural texture of the material, shape without too much unnecessary decoration, or the bruise made by long-use time. Such products have gained an increasing popularity in Taiwan’s consumers—from MUJI to small boutiques scattered around shopping districts. Most of them sell commodities for daily use.

This current paper uses Japanese aesthetics that emphasizes natural flavors as the basis on which to conclude the conventions and criterion that are applied to style of representations, thus presenting a theory of aesthetics of nature for future reference in product design.

2 The Aesthetics of Nature

Aesthetics involves a series of cognitive or emotional responses elicited from appreciating artworks, which later turns into an understanding of the meaning and connotations regarding “beauty”. Thus presume that aesthetics is closely correlated to the capability of appreciating the phenomena of the world and conclude that a connection exists between artistic forms and beauty. If the aesthetics places a high premium on natural beauty, it is called the aesthetics of nature[1].

3 The Aesthetics of Nature in Japan

3-1 The awareness of beauty in natural surroundings

As an island country where temperate and subtropical climates coexist, Japan is renowned for its variety of sceneries and a wide range of religious, artworks and literary achievements, which reveal their attitude towards nature: harmony and coexistence. This awareness of the pursuit of beauty is recognized as the bedrock for Japanese culture[2][3].

For instance, Shinto (神道), an ethnic religion of the Japanese people, regards gods as an omnipresent presence in the universe. Beasts, fowls, even rocks, streams, or mists floating high above valleys are considered to be influenced by gods and thus manifest the sacredness of divine power and an energy of their own. This explains why the Japanese people have developed a life philosophy centered round natural cycles and harmony with nature[4].

3-2 Wabi-sabi

As the most celebrated aesthetics in Japan, wabi-sabi is a kind of perspective which embraces the “truth” (実) and the “pathos of things” (物の哀れ) and which is somewhat influenced by Zen. The truth represents a state of truthfulness in all things and therefore is deemed as an element of beauty. The pathos of things derives from the collective sentiments toward the mother nature, even a wider spectrum of society[3][4]. With respect to the Japanese Zen, the greatest master, D. T. Suzuki (鈴木大拙), proffered the viewpoint of “One is included in tens of thousands; tens of thousands are included in one” [5][6]. In short, the true beauty should shine through “one,” an entity of incompleteness, for the viewer to see the consummate beauty in “tens of thousands”.

Wabi-sabi is a compound noun. “Wabi” (侘び) literally meant the solitude and simplicity in nature, and is now seen as a philosophial thinking and lifestyle [6][7][8]. It is exhibited in the tranquility and melancholy of the tea ceremony, ikebana (華道), and common objects or artifact. “Sabi” (寂び) on the other hand, stresses the state of chilliness or withering, which suggests the transience of each stage in a life and shows a humbleness on the viewer’s part[6][8]. From the above, it is obvious that both “wabi” and “sabi” emphasizes over the nature of things and being in accord with nature. The beauty of a thing exists in its nature. Feng Wei (1996) stated that “wabi-sabi” refers to the imperfection of anything. Only through such imperfection can we observe and relate to more than usual. It means that imperfection can hold higher value than perfection.

3-3 The tea ceremony

It was Murata Shuko (村田珠光), a famous Zen master, who integrated Japanese traditional culture and Zen thinking into tea ceremonies. Sen no Rikyu (千利休), as a successor, had standardized the rituals of the tea ceremony by instilling the spirit of “wabi-sabi” into it. He stressed “scarcity” and “simplicity,” aspiring to a state of bareness and concluding that the core values of Japanese tea ceremonies are “peace, respect, cleanliness, and solitude” [7]. Those atmosphere could be felt in a chashitsu (茶室) and the mind of persons involved in the tea ceremony.
A chashitsu is a thatched hut built in an asymmetrical structure. From the unvarnished timber, thatched roof, and muddy walls, one knows immediately the original flavor of this house. Inside the chashitsu, there are some unevenness and roughness of tea bowl (茶碗). Overall this shows a sense of solitude—truthfulness, utterly devoid of pretenses, and simplicity. The entrance of a teahouse is small and unadorned. The entrance height is about two human heights. The entrance is small so that the body has to bend forward when walking inside. The entrance height is approximately two human heights. The entrance height can be probed in the future.

3-4 Analysis of products on market

The above materials indicate the attributes of aesthetics of nature in Japan are as follows: simplicity, being in accord with nature, truthfulness, and irregularity. Then we conducted product analysis and discovered types of representations. All products under scrutiny are Japanese commodities sold over market (see Table 1).

4 Building Formal Representations

According to the analytical results, the attributes and representations of the aesthetics of nature are shown in Table 2. The definitions for these representations are as follows:

1. Simplicity: A simple style without too much alteration in patterns.
2. Devoid of pretenses: The structure and material of the product add a minimal decorative effect to the product in question.
3. Simplicity: The color, material, and shape are totally presented to the eye of viewers.
4. Derived from natural resources: These items are made with natural resources or direct processing techniques, such as wood, stone, or metals.
5. Coexisting with nature: These products are made with eco-friendly materials and can be decomposed when the product life cycle comes to an end.

(6) Bruises made by long-time use: The material is left with small marks that are produced from chemical or physical changes: timber decay, fabric color fading, or the rust on the metal, etc.

(7) Keep the rough material: The texture of the material is totally retained. By touching or merely seeing it, one feels the richness of the texture.

(8) The mark left by the manufacturing process is retained.

(9) Inherent defects: The defects are turned into a feature to the product.

(10) Asymmetry: Two slightly similar or completely different factors are combined in the item.

5 Conclusions and Suggestions

According to research results, we proffer suggestions as follows:

1. More samples should be collected and analyzed for a more accurate result.
2. The definitions of formal representation should be confirmed through more discussions.
3. Chinese calligraphy and Taoism are also noted for an emphasis on nature. The similarities and differences of the two can be probed in the future.

Reference

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