

# What Can Be Seen and What Cannot Be Seen— the Aesthetic Sense of Japanese Medieval Arts

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## 1

Today, we will talk about Japanese aesthetics as seen in Japanese tea ceremonies. “Aesthetics” is used here to refer to the standard people use to judge what they find beautiful. Japan has distinct standards, which are typically showcased in tea ceremonies.

Perhaps some will say, “Beautiful things are beautiful regardless of the audience. Is this not true in every country?” Certainly, there are such types of beauty. For example, overseas visitors will all regard luxurious palaces and gardens filled with flowers as beautiful. The Japanese will also praise the Palace of Versailles as being beautiful. However, 800 years ago, at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, artists appeared in Japan and advocated different standards of beauty, which influenced many aspects like literature, fine arts, performing arts, and architecture. In particular, the tea ceremony, which was established in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, emphasized these standards.

In modern times, this standard is referred to as *wabi*. A tea ceremony based on *wabi* is called *wabi tea*. Originally, *wabi* was a word that referred to a troubled situation due to the shortage of what should be, or a loneliness stemming from a lack of company. Thus, *wabi tea* refers to a tea ceremony that is bare, lonely, and where one's wishes are not satisfied. However, what does it mean when something that looks *wabi* is beautiful? More specifically, something that is “beautiful” should satisfy its viewer, should it not?

## 2

Last month (September 2016), Mohammad bin Salman, the deputy crown prince of Saudi Arabia, visited His Majesty the Emperor in Tokyo. *The Gulf News* of the UAE covered the event with the headline, “One Perfect Picture as Two Cultures Meet.” The photo that accompanied the article is shown in **Figure 1**.

This photo caused a great stir in the Arab world, as it highlighted the stark differences between the Japanese and Arab cultures. Some sample tweets below:

**Figure 1**



Saudi deputy crown prince and Japanese emperor at the Imperial Palace, September 1, 2016

“Striking minimalism in this room where the Emperor of Japan met with Saudi Arabia’s Deputy Crown Prince today”@ahmed

“Akihito ‘Emperor of Japan’ Meets with Mohammad bin Salman Deputy Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia. What this simplicity?”@7amadAlBassam

“Japan meets Saudi Arabia. I wonder if MBS has ever sat in such a simple, unadorned room before”@sarah\_birke

“This room is far below his highness and Japanese should have selected better venue for the meeting”@FYEBITDA

“Would you like me to recommend an interior designer, your imperial highness? You could do with some gold furniture”@KarlreMarks

People were clearly surprised by the simplicity of the room. Some were angry and called the room offensive. A kind person even inquired if they needed to be introduced to an interior designer. Ultimately, the problem seems to be that there was not enough gold. Thus, what kind of interior design is regarded favorably in Saudi Arabia?

The picture in **Figure 2** shows the late King Abdullah meeting with President Obama in Saudi Arabia. The room is certainly opulent.

Not all countries are this luxurious in taste. For example, let us look at the United States (**Figure 3**):

President Obama speaks to King Abdullah II of Jordan in the Oval Office of the White House. The setting may appear simple in comparison to the royal palace in Saudi Arabia. But the room has paintings, a fireplace, and statues—compared to Japan, it is far more

**Figure 2**



Source of photo: *Alamy Stock Photo*

**Figure 3**



Source of photo: *Alamy Stock Photo*

**Figure 4**



Source of photo: *Kyodo News*

decorative.

Perhaps the photo taken in Japan was an exception? That is to say, perhaps meetings with guests from the Western world are conducted in a flashier room, while the Prince of Saudi Arabia was treated to a tepid welcome? Alas, that is not the case. The next picture (**Figure 4**) shows the Emperor and Empress meeting the Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his wife, Sophie Grégoire Trudeau.

This is the same setting as before. In other words, the Japanese do not consider it impolite to welcome foreign guests in this minimalist space.

Do you notice anything unusual about this room? If you take a look behind Their Majesties and the Trudeaus, you will notice that there is a shoji screen instead of a wall. The garden outside can subsequently be viewed by sliding the screen open. Traditionally, the gardens of Japanese nobility are beautifully landscaped for viewing and appreciation.

Take the pond, for example. A thousand years ago, the nobility's residences were built in the Heian palatial style, or the *shinden-zukuri* (a main structure built to face, and peripheral structures built to encircle, the south garden). These residences were designed so that the main structure was situated in front of a pond, and trees (e.g. cherry and plum) were planted for viewing pleasure. In fact, it can be said that seasonal change itself – spring flowers, summer greenery, autumn leaves, and winter snow – was the subject of appreciation within the garden. Thus, the subject is temporal change itself. In Japan, when designing a garden, the designers are expected to calculate the change in time between dawn to dusk, the changes in the four seasons, and the changes from the annual growth of trees.

In fact, there is a large garden and plum tree outside the room (Takenoma/Bamboo Room) where the Emperor met with the Saudi crown prince. Plum trees are also planted throughout the Kyoto Palace grounds. Along with cherry blossoms, plum blossoms are another spring flower well loved by the Japanese. Of course, the flowers only bloom during the spring, and they were common in the residences of noble families; people have appreciated the greenery from spring to fall for over a thousand years. However, in the photo of the visit, we are unable to see the gardens due to the shoji. The beautiful plum trees are hidden out of sight. In other words, this space deliberately frees itself from beauty and luxury. It is no wonder that people in Saudi Arabia become upset with this setting as being “offensive.”

### 3

In reality, Japan did not prefer minimalist designs from the very beginning. Rather, Japanese nobles relished beautiful and luxurious items until the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The royal palaces were bursting with color and were adorned with abundant amounts of gold. However, by the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, the nobility's dominance diminished and the emperor ruled only by title. Instead, Japan was ruled in actuality by the samurai. Politically and militari-

ly, the samurai dominated the nobles, but culturally and artistically, the nobles dominated the samurai. However, the nobles already recognized that their prime had passed; thus, their worldview was different from their ancestors of the previous 100 years. Around this time, *Yugen* or a new way of thinking emerged in literature. Over the 400-year period during the Middle Ages, this idea permeated every artistic field. At the very end of this movement came the tea ceremony.

*Yugen* basically means something that is “faint, dark, and hard to see.” This word was used to describe the style of the Japanese tanka poem written by Fujiwara no Teika (Fujiwara no Sadaie, 1162-1241). In the beginning, many were critical of his poems, but eventually he gained many followers and completely changed the writing process of Japanese tanka poetry. Thus, Fujiwara no Teika became deified as a revolutionary Japanese tanka poet. The reason why Teika’s poems were referred to as *yugen* is that his poems were esoteric. Many people were confused by what Teika intended to achieve.

There is an explanation of the same period which was given by Kamo no Chomei. To him, *yugen* is “a sentiment not expressed by words, a landscape invisible to the eye.” For example, he said, everyone understands the beauty of cherry blossoms and autumn leaves because they are visible. However, when viewing an autumn evening sky without any colors or sounds, some people may tear up while others feel nothing at all.

This difference perfectly describes the difference between a *yugen*-style poem and poems written previously. Since this alone does not fully elucidate, Chomei explains further by using an example. For example, say one goes to the mountains to view the fall foliage, but it is hidden by the fog and cannot be viewed. However, if you get a peek of the beautiful foliage behind the fog, you start to imagine how beautiful the entire mountain of foliage would be. This imagined foliage is said to be more beautiful than the actual foliage itself.

Chomei gives another example. For a husband who cheated on his wife, which scene is more impactful: a wife who is wailing loudly and blaming the husband, or a reserved wife who appears to be enduring everything in silence and tears up occasionally? It is said that the latter scenario increases guilt in the husband and increases his love for his wife. This is because in the former scenario, the anger is clearly communicated with words and behavior, but in the latter scenario, the husband imagines and sympathizes with his wife’s position and experiences her psychological state as if he were experiencing it himself.

Then why are imagined scenes and empathy generated out of one’s imagination so effective? It is because the information is not passively received, but is instead actively created by oneself. That is to say, people are more deeply moved by emotions that accompany imaginative creation.

Let us review one of Fujiwara no Teika’s poems as an example. The following poem was written in 1186 and was eventually regarded as a vital work in the context of the tea ceremony.

Looking around/

There are neither spring flowers nor autumn foliage/

At this bare beach house this fall dusk

xIn that era, poem writing was commonly done by exercising one's imagination around a predetermined topic, rather than by writing down actual experiences like a journal entry. This poem, too, is not Teika's actual experience. Similar to a novel, he imagines a fictitious situation and writes the poem in the voice of the protagonist.

What is strange about this poem is that it describes things you cannot see. Normally, poems communicate what one is seeing through words. However, the fictitious narrator sees nothing but a lonely seascape. So why does Teika have his narrator recount something he cannot see in this poem?

The narrator tells the tale of *what he saw previously* and *what he cannot see now*. Rather than conveying the beauty of what he sees, he discusses the circumstance in which he can no longer see beautiful things. The words, "cherry blossoms" and "autumn leaves," in fact symbolize all beautiful things in their entirety.

But why is a nobleman at a bare beach house in the first place? At the time, when a noble was accused of a crime, his punishment was *ruzai* (exile), so he would be sent and ordered to live in a remote place. Oftentimes, this remote place was a small island as it was difficult for them to escape; this is similar to how Napoleon was exiled to Elba. Moreover, these islands were usually home to just fishing villages, so the exiled noblemen were also forced to live on the beach. There, the nobles wrote various poems. Many of them moved people's hearts and were later compiled into poetry collections, where they remained as famous poems.

Thus, the noble in Teika's poem living in a bare home on the beach signified—regardless of whether he actually did bad things or was just hated by those in power—that he had been ousted from Kyoto and was living an unexpected life. In this regard, the elements in the poem's subject, "spring flowers and autumn foliage," symbolize the colorful life of Kyoto. In his mind, the narrator imagines the cherry blossoms and autumn leaves in Kyoto while watching the plain seaside in front of him. The reader must imagine the cherry blossoms and autumn leaves not actually viewed by the narrator but those imagined by him, as well as understanding the mindset of the narrator who would imagine such things.

As a further example, we can cite a poem below that was written by the exiled noble, Ariwara no Yukihiro.

If on occasion someone should ask of me/

Please tell them I weep as does the saltwater from seaweed/

Living *wabu* at the beach in Suma

Here, *wabu* means to live without one's friends, social status, an affluent life, and so on, as well as to lament the state of not having what one is supposed to have. The nominal form of the verb "wabu" is "wabi." In other words, "wabi" means a deficiency of something that should be, along with sentiments it engenders, an admiration for the past and a sorrow for the present. This leads to a deep reflection on the meaning of life, which one would never have considered when one was happy.

If people see beautiful things every day, they are unable to appreciate them. Ironically, people can only recount their past blessings when they are lost – but those things are irredeemable. Thus, which is better: to be in a state where you are blessed but are ignorant of your blessings, or where you recognize the blessings but they have been lost. Many people may prefer the former. However, one can also think that it is only after you experience both that you understand what life truly is. At least that is how the Japanese in the Middle Ages thought with regards to beauty.

For example, Yoshida Kenko said the following in his famous essay, *Tsurezuregusa*: "Cherry blossoms are better after they scatter, the moon is better on nights when it rains." Moreover, Murata Juko, who is said to have started the *wabi tea*, stated that the "full moon is boring if there are no clouds." Both explain that the true value of something beautiful is recognized only when it is gone. At such time, the beautiful object is no longer in reality, and can only be viewed in one's imagination.

This gives rise to the idea that things that were once beautiful embody a truer beauty than things that are still beautiful. This creates a new standard of beauty, which was initially called "cold" but can also be referred to as "withering" or "thinning." These refer to being moved by incomplete and insufficient phenomena such as the moon behind the clouds, autumn leaves obscured by fog. Rich beauty, such as cherry blossoms in full bloom or the full moon, are called "warm" or "fattened"; they are regarded as a beauty that everyone can recognize, but does not deeply move people's hearts. Even in Noh theater, Zeami considered "withering" beauty to be superior to the "flower."

Take the tea ceremony as an example. Hosting a tea ceremony was originally a pastime of the daimyo class and the wealthy. The tea sets made in China were preferred, with characteristics such as completeness, grace, and high value.

The opposite of this is found in the Bizen and Shigaraki pottery of Japan. Since glaze is not applied, the surface does not become vitreous and is not smooth. Additionally, because they are baked for several days at high temperatures, the initially well-molded pottery gradually becomes distorted. Also, as firewood is used to fuel the fire, the pottery changes color where the ash flies into the kiln and lands on the pottery. Moreover, no one knows what the shape or color of the pottery will be until it is taken out of the kiln. The outcome is entirely random.

However, from around the time of Juko, masters of the tea ceremony began intentionally using this equipment. Soon, beginners started to use them as well, stating its use to

“make cold and withered.” Juko criticized this, teaching that one must first handle good equipment and know its worth before “withering” can be carried out as a next step. It is meaningless for people who have never seen cherry blossoms in full bloom to declare, “Cherry blossoms are better after they scatter,” and then go to a cherry blossom viewing after the flowers have gone.

A representative piece of tea ceremony equipment is the tea bowl, and the most popular type is called the “*raku* (easy).” Because these are formed by manually kneading clay without the use of a pottery wheel, its shape is imperfect and always has some type of distortion. Although glaze is used, sometimes the glaze is not evenly applied; in some cases, the underlying clay can be visible. However, these were not failed attempts at glaze coating. This is actually a process called “coating omission,” where a section was deliberately left without glaze. In other words, the pottery was intentionally made incomplete.

#### 4

There is actually a Buddhist philosophy underlying the idea that “cherry blossoms are better after they scatter.” This reflects a particular outlook on the world idealized during the Middle Ages: impermanence. This is the idea that everything follows the process of “creation - peak - decline - annihilation.” For example, the following cycles follow the same pattern: “infant - adult - elderly - death,” “spring - summer - autumn - winter,” “morning - afternoon - evening - night.”

If we go by this cycle, an “autumn evening” is indeed a decline. Subsequently, flowers in full bloom and the full moon represent beauty at its peak. The “cold” and “withered” is thus beauty in decline. The beauty is no longer in a perfect form, but it is possible to imagine it in its former perfection. In addition, because it is imperfect, one can imagine all the stages of the impermanent cycle merely by viewing this form, and feel “*wabi*” by superimposing it to one’s own life. This is what it means when one imagines one’s own “peak period” (flower) and eventual mortality (nothingness).

However, Buddhism has another view of impermanence, namely where the laws of the world are in the following cycle: “nothingness - occurrence - peak - decline - nothingness - occurrence ...” In *Nanbouroku*, the classic text on the tea ceremony, the following two poems are cited to represent the soul of the *wabi* tea.

Looking around/  
There are neither spring flowers nor autumn foliage/  
At this bare beach house this fall dusk

To those who wait only for flowers to bloom/  
I would love to show the spring evinced by young plants, /  
emerging from among the residual snow of the mountain village



The first poem is the poem we introduced earlier written by Teika, embodying the state of *wabi*. However, the second poem written by Fujiwara no Ietaka is slightly different.

“Yamazato/mountain village” refers to a small village in the mountains. It is also very remote and far from the city. When winter comes and snow accumulates, transportation to other places is interrupted, forcing villagers to simply wait for spring. Thus, the blooming spring flowers are not only beautiful, but also a symbol of the resumption of life without inconveniences.

Just before spring, a grass called *fukinotou* peeks out from the snow and signals that spring is arriving soon. In a few days, the snow will melt and the *fukinotou* will appear across the entire area. However, this sight will never surpass the emotions one experiences from seeing the grass first peek out of the snow, the first slight sight of *fukinotou* in the snow after a long winter. Ietaka argues that its beauty is no less than that of cherry blossoms in full bloom.

What comes to mind when one sees grass peeking through the snow? Perhaps it is the resurrection and circle of life (nothingness - existence - nothingness - existence). In other words, it is the progression of eternal life: a spring with blooming flowers, a summer painted green, a fall with withering foliage, a snowy winter, and spring once again. This represents the other meaning of “impermanence,” and the poem, “Grass amid the Snow” is symbolic of this. However, even though we speak of the progression of life, this year’s flowers are not the same as last year, and next year’s flowers will also be different. Humans may experience rebirth, but in the next life, they will be reborn as a different person. In other words, the life of the individual “self” is limited to this lifetime.

People feel it is absurd that the life that exists now will eventually expire. Viewed in reverse, however, it is equally absurd that life is created out of nothingness; life is merely a coincidental favor. It is only a coincidental benefit. It is a miracle that for some reason our lives exist in a universe where nothingness is the norm. It is even more of a miracle for two lives to cross paths. This lays the groundwork for the philosophy behind “*Ichigo ichie*” (in one lifetime, one chance to meet) found in the tea ceremony: that it is a miracle that two people sit together in this very time and place, and the moment must be cherished as such.

This philosophy not only applies between people, but even between people and flowers. Let me introduce the episode of Sen no Rikyu’s tea ceremony of the morning glory. The morning glory only blooms in the morning; by the afternoon, the flowers wither and fall - it is an ephemeral process. However, it is very beautiful when so many flowers blossom simultaneously.

## 5

Sen no Rikyu, who is said to have completed the concept of *wabi tea*, served Toyoto-

mi Hideyoshi, the greatest political authority at that time. According to an old text on tea, *Chawa Shigetsu Shu*, there was once a person who told Hideyoshi that many morning glories were in bloom in Rikyu's garden and that it was the prime time to see them. Hideyoshi asked Rikyu to view the morning glory, scheduling a tea ceremony in the morning. However, when Hideyoshi arrived at Rikyu's tea house, there was not a single morning glory in bloom. When a dissatisfied Hideyoshi entered the tea ceremony room, there was a single, bright-colored morning glory in the alcove. Rikyu had cut all the other blooming morning glories for this purpose. It is said Hideyoshi and his followers all felt awakened by this display, and Rikyu was commended.

Why did Rikyu leave a single flower and throw away the rest? This is because the countless morning glory blossoms in the garden are a beautiful sight, but do not do much more than to offer their beauty. This is similar to the beauty of the flower and autumn leaves referred to in the earlier poem. However, the single morning glory is akin to the grass amid the snow. It makes one imagine the multitude of morning glories that had blossomed in the garden.

Furthermore, morning glory flowers have a short life span, as they only blossom in the morning. However, because they blossom in a magnificent display each day, we forget this fact. We incorrectly think the flowers from yesterday are still in bloom, even though each flower is different and that yesterday's flowers are no longer around today. When morning glories are viewed as a group, they are the same every day. However, when viewed individually, they are disparate. The morning glory from yesterday dies, while another takes life today. To experience this, the morning glory must not be seen as a group but should be appreciated individually. When only one morning glory is placed in front of us, we have a foreboding that it will soon wither and die. When we experience the transience of life, we become aware of the tremendous value in the morning glory blooming in all its beauty in front of us. The short time that will be spent with the follower will also begin to feel very valuable. The person and the flower, two ephemeral lives, are crossing paths in an encounter no short of a miracle. In other words, the meeting is an "Ichigo ichie."

If you look forward to seeing many morning glory blossoms, then a single blossom will feel like an incomplete way to display the beauty of the morning glory. However, our imagination does not start working unless we encounter something incomplete or insufficient. Throwing away the numerous flowers that already existed to purposely render them incomplete or insufficient - that is the way of the *wabi tea*.

Rikyu built many tea houses, but only one – the Taian tearoom – remains (**Figure 5**).

Taian is currently designated as a national treasure. At 1.9 meters in both length and width, the tearoom is extremely small. One must crouch in order to enter the small entrance, and there will be a furnace to the back left. To the right of this, there is a decorative space called "toko" or "tokonoma (alcove)." Ordinarily, a hanging scroll or flower (or both) adorn this space. The hanging scroll will either display calligraphy or paintings.

Figure 5



"Taian" owned by Myoukian, Source of photo: Benrido

Bamboo cylinders are sometimes used to display flowers; the first instance this is when Rikyu created a similar vessel by cutting down bamboo in the forest himself.

What was the architectural style of Japan before the tearooms? First, most residences of former nobles were in the *shinden-zukuri* style, which is essentially a single large room without any dividers. Moreover, instead of using walls, the rooms were separated from the outside with a movable plate called *shitomi* (latticed shutters). These shutters can fully open during the summer to allow ventilation and were thus suited for the hot Kyoto summers. The space was shielded from outside view using drooping shades. The shades were similar to blinds or lace curtains, as they allow wind and light to pass through while obstructing the view of the interior from a brighter exterior.

Samurai in the Middle Ages adopted a style called *Shoin-zukuri*, which became the foundation to current Japanese-style architecture. *Shoji* screens that slid horizontally were used as boundaries to the outside, rather than shutters or shades that moved vertically. *Shoji* screens still allowed light to enter while shielding outside view. Furthermore, if the screens were opened, the wind could pass. Japan is hot in the summer and cold in the winter. In the winter, we can take measures against the cold by using heaters or by wearing thick layers of clothing. However, there were no measures against the heat in an era without air conditioning, apart from increasing ventilation. The screens were therefore essential for allowing wind to pass during summers.

Traditionally, Japanese architecture has been stylistically open to allow for light and wind. However, the *Taian* tearoom is a closed room. The walls are mostly clay. There are

three shoji windows for lighting, but they are all quite small. However, it is precisely because the room is closed off from the outside that the host and guest can focus on the dialogue. Ultimately, the tearoom is a dedicated space for conversation and not a place for daily living.

However, one element the tearoom inherited from the Shoin-zukuri style: the alcove. In a tearoom, the alcove is always decorated. The alcove was originally a part of the Shoin-zukuri style. Initially, the style had incorporated a shelf in the master's study to display artwork, but people eventually started placing an alcove and decorating shelf in the room used to greet guests. This alcove is now seen as the *tokonoma* alcove. The *tokonoma* still remains as a basic component of a Japanese-style room.

## 6

In the present day, there are various tearoom designs, and tea ceremonies also take on various forms. Hiroshi Sugimoto, a contemporary artist, is not a professional master of the tea ceremony, but he designed tea houses in various places. Allow me to introduce one of his alcove decorations at his imaginary restaurant *Misen-kyo* where Sugimoto entertains guests (**Figure 6**).

Sugimoto sets a theme at each entertainment. Usually, the theme is a message to the guests he welcomes. The guest to this entertainment was an actress who starred in a TV series depicting the 15th-century Ōnin War in Kyoto. Sugimoto subsequently set the

Figure 6



Source of photo: *Chiba Nippo*

theme of the event to Basho's haiku, "Oh summer grass, the ruins of the soldiers' dreams." This haiku represents a place that was once a battlefield where samurais' dreams flared and perished; now, all that remains is the summer grass. In short, the poem embodies impermanence.

The hanging scroll is an ornately decorated Lotus Sutra; while beautiful in appearance, it also conveys the truths of Buddhism. This scroll displays excerpts from the long Lotus Sutra rather than the whole sutra in its entirety. In other words, even if you read this section, you cannot know the teachings of Buddha. However, for those who have already read the Lotus Sutra, this excerpt will remind them of the entire piece.

The flower is placed inside an old helmet. The helmet was recently excavated and is rusted. For the helmet to have been buried in the soil rather than carefully preserved in a home signifies that it was in actual use and was likely abandoned in the field when its owner died in the war. It had been slumbering underground for hundreds of years, as the helmet is estimated to be 800 years old. Summer grass grows from a hole in the helmet. It appears as though a new life was borne out of the helmet, which is a possession of the dead.

Furthermore, helmets were luxury items plated in gold foil; thus, this helmet was probably worn by a high-ranking warlord. However, the gold foil has almost entirely been worn off and the iron is rusted. Time has annihilated its existence, similar to how green grass in the summer withers in the fall. In other words, this demonstrates a state of impermanence.

"Summer grass" is green and most certainly is a symbol of resurrection. It also represents a symbol of impermanence, if one imagines how it will soon wither. However, this grass is actually an elaborate sculpture and will never die. Though it appears fleeting, it is actually everlasting. We can interpret this as a resistance to the impermanence.

There is a mechanism in this art that cites and then disrupts the traditional philosophy of impermanence. This is precisely the work of contemporary artists; it is their role to overturn accepted traditions and to reveal a new perspective.

Simultaneously, this is perhaps a flattery - that the beauty of the actress and guest is not fleeting but eternal. If you surmise further, this may also be a suggestion that her beauty is artificial rather than natural.

## 7

Let us return to the first problem. Why is the *shoji* closed in the room where the Emperor welcomes guests of the State? You probably already know the answer: a closed room helps people to focus on the conversation. However, the Arabs may object: "But the room is far too plain," they may say, "It wouldn't hurt to have a bit more adornments. And what about the *tokonoma* alcove?"

The concept of the *tokonoma* started in samurai residences during the Middle Ages

and did not exist in older residences for the nobility. Thus, it did not exist inside the imperial court. At the court, it was common to build temporary shelves and to decorate them based on the ritual or event at hand. When we review the photo of the meeting between the Emperor and Prince Mohammad, we can see that the table in the center is decorated with flowers. This display was set up specifically for this interview.

Although it is just one vase, can you sense the formal and austere energy it brings to the whole space? It could be said that the vase dominates the entire space. This effect could not have occurred if there were multiple decorations in this room.

One explanation for this effect is how the flower and the leaf are symmetrical. Usually, arranged flowers in a tearoom avoid symmetry as it makes the arrangement appear artificial. Flowers in a tearoom must appear as if a part of nature was transferred directly to the room. However, they are designed to be symmetrical in public rituals, particularly in religious ceremonies such as in Buddhism. This expresses that human beings used their full effort to create and dedicate beautiful objects to the gods and/or to people they respect. In other words, in a tearoom, it is important to look natural, and in rituals, it is important to be able to view traits of human sincerity and effort.

For the final time, let us again look at the photo of the meeting between the Emperor and Prince Mohammad of Saudi Arabia. What is the message in this room? The symmetrical flowers indicate the utmost respect in welcoming the guest. The closed shoji screens reveal the intention to converse intimately without distractions. The fact that the sliding door can be opened means that when the conversation lulls and a change in topic is desired, the shoji screens can be opened at any time to reveal the outside world. There, you will see a large garden pebbled with small white stones, along with a large white plum tree standing out front.

There is a convergence of two traditions here: the culture of nobles from over 1000 years ago and the culture of the samurai from several hundred years ago. The convergence of these traditions conveys just one message to guests: “we consider you very important.”

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