

## Component 2, Part 4

# Centripetal Forces in Japan: Cultural Appreciation of Beauty

A strong cultural centripetal force is the concept and appreciation of beauty. Many Japanese see beauty in the landscape, in art, music, crafts, gardens, dress, architecture, and flowers. A useful website on the history of *ikebana*, the art of flower arrangement, and photographs of the various styles is <http://www.ikebanahq.org/index.html>. A website describing basic ikebana schools and events is <http://www.japan-zone.com/culture/ikebana.shtml>. Traditional Japanese notions of beauty are stylized and elements are culturally unique as illustrated by these scenes. Both symmetry and asymmetry find expression in Japanese art; both are present in bonsai, pottery, and traditional gardens. To view examples of Japanese gardens, visit the following website: <http://learn.bowdoin.edu/japanesegardens/>.



**Figure 13:** Iris flowers bloom along rice paddies and roadsides. Their purple color represents the aristocracy and is a favorite flower of the Japanese. Iris are a common theme in Japanese art, such as lacquerware. (Source: Alice Tym)

Color has both significance and symbolism. The four oldest color terms, *aka* (red), *kuro* (black), *shiro* (white), and *ao* (blue) were written in the 8th Century. Early in Japanese history, colors were used to signify rank; purple was the most important color for the aristocracy (Figure 13). In the most famous Japanese novel, *The Tale of Genji*, the beloved companion of Genji is named Murasaki (purple). It is from the *murasaki-so* plant that the purple dye is extracted (Hibi, 2000). But, it was a yellowish brown color that was restricted to the emperor. This dye came from a mixture of the Japanese wax tree and the suo tree. This unique Japanese color derived from Japanese plants tied society together through a common recognition of the emperor's authority and dress.



**Figure 14:** These shoji are in the Izumo Cultural Heritage Museum in Shimane Prefecture. (Source: Alice Tym)

Both brown and green appear in nature in many shades. Tea is also both brown and green. Paneling in homes, the shoji screens, split bamboo, utensils, tea houses, and the traditional tea ceremony (*chanoyu*) itself use natural shades of brown amid outdoor greenery (Figure 14). The following website describes the components of the tea ceremony:

<http://instruct1.cit.cornell.edu/courses/la694/index.html>.

Red is both visually stimulating and historically a sacred color. Originally lacquerware used red, vermilion (*shu*), and black. Beginning in the seventeenth century, Imari porcelain featured the color red. Now the vermilion seal is used to stamp official documents. Many Japanese understand the role that color plays in everyday life, highlighting beauty, social rank, and Japanese history.



**Figure 15:** Traditionally, Japanese revere the simplicity of nature (Source: Alice Tym)

Many Japanese, like their Chinese and Korean neighbors, believe placement and detail are essential to beauty (Figure 15). Landscapes are layered. The flow direction of water, its sounds, the shape of the bed, and its relationship to rocks are all planned in a Japanese garden (Gerbert, 2001) (Figures 16 and 17). Lines within a house flow to the outside garden so that the beauty of nature is not closed off from the home (Figure 18). Traditional notions about beauty are still in evidence throughout the archipelago, and, for many Japanese they are a strong centripetal force.



**Figure 16:** The Rinzaï Zen Buddhist garden, Ryoan-ji, illustrates the traditional importance of simplicity and meditation in Japanese culture. This kare-sansui, or dry landscape style, is a collection of 15 rocks. The rocks may be considered islands or sleeping tigers, or whatever the imagination desires. The white pebbles are raked into patterns which change the dynamics of the garden. (Source: Alice Tym)



**Figure 17:** The Adachi Garden of Yasugi in Shimane Prefecture has been selected several times as Japan's Garden of the Year. The landscape is layered and appears much larger than it actually is. An unseen highway crosses in front of the waterfall (right rear); the waterfall is turned off at night! (Source: Alice Tym)



**Figure 18:** The entrance, *genkan*, to the Matsuoka's home is one of dramatic boulders and stone lanterns surrounding the sun porch. The garden and house are joined as one. (Source: Alice Tym)

The art of *ukiyo-e*, the "pictures of the floating world," is a product of Tokugawa metropolitan culture. These colorful woodblock prints by famous artists such as, Utamaro, Hokusai, Hiroshige, and Sharaku, are excellent portraits of traditional Japanese culture, as well as Japanese rural and urban landscapes. Visit the following Web site for examples of ukiyo-e:

- <http://www.bahnhof.se/~secutor/ukiyo-e/guide.html>

### **Note To Teacher**

Contrast the groomed landscape of a Japanese garden with its shades of green and numerous imposing rocks with a garden in the US with its flowers and vast expanse of mowed lawn. Contrast the importance of color in Japanese society with the often helter-skelter array of colors in the US tableaux. Compare the natural wood elements in traditional Japanese homes with the stainless steel, sheetrock, and granite counters in modern US homes. The video "Dream Garden" about Japanese gardens is available from the Freer Gallery Bookstore, 202 633-4880. Information may be found on the following website: <http://www.asia.si.edu/>. Traditional notions of beauty are also evident in the film, "Memoirs of a Geisha," however, before discussing the film, teachers are strongly encouraged to read Joan Ericson's critical review in *Education About Asia*, Fall 2006.

### **References**

- Ericson, Joan E., "Con/texts for Viewing Geisha," *Education About Asia*, Volume 11, Number 2, Fall 2006.
- Gerbert, Elaine, "Visualizing Nature in Japan," *Education About Asia*, Volume 6, Number 2, Fall 2001.
- Hibi, Sadao. *The Colors of Japan*. Kodansha International, Tokyo, 2000.

### **Additional Resources**

A useful website for curriculum materials on Japanese art is: <http://www.asia.si.edu/education/teacherResources/onlineGuidesJapanese.htm>.