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Contemplations on wabisabi

Differences in “abstract” scenes

Wabisabi could be the answer the world has been waiting for

Since mentioning wabisabi in the issue before last, I've raised the topic with dining companions on numerous occasions and noticed that it arouses intense interest among my French friends. So this time I'd like to contemplate just why it is they react this way.

The French are westerners with Judeo-Christian traditions, and thus no connection to either Shinto or Buddhism. Why then are they so intrigued by the notion of wabisabi?

Although wabisabi could be said to offer very tangible guidelines for day-to-day living, the ideas at its foundation are expressed in abstract terms such as simplicity, humility, restraint, joy, melancholy, beauty, impermanence, spirituality, and virtue. Moreover, while equivalent words exist in Japanese for all of these, in my experience the Japanese have an aversion to playing with abstract terms, preferring more concrete explanations. This is in complete contrast to France, where people love to speak in abstractions. Without a doubt this comes down to differences in education style. In France, from a very young age, that is from the elementary school stage, teachers talk more to the children about “morals” than “rules”, more about “beauty” than the “convenience” (benri) one hears mentioned so

often in Japan.

On the other hand, the Japanese do have an admirable tendency not to bother explaining what is difficult to explain. The same cannot be said for the French. I'm reminded of various things my friend Mrs. Mishima has discussed with me over the years. Having spent her childhood in France, she understands us French well.

One day, I asked her what she thought of the French. The ensuing conversation went as follows.

“We Japanese love France. French people, French history, great French figures like Moliere, Louis XIV, De Gaulle. But we do find the French a little tiring.”

“Really? (Not that I was especially surprised by this) Why is that?”

“Well, you French invariably want to understand everything. You never rest until there's an explanation for everything. Couldn't you occasionally relax a bit and just take things as they come? Go with the flow, so to speak, rather than trying to swim against the current in each and every thing...”

Mrs. Mishima's view pretty much covers one of the fundamental differences between the Japanese and the French. At the same time, it also explains why the French are so drawn to the idea of wabisabi, the essence of which is a humble approach to nature, and a self-restraint that flies in the face

of runaway, rampant modern-day materialism. Dancing to the tune of today's over-the-top materialism, we continue to consume, then consume some more. Our cravings cultivated by fashion magazines, each season we buy new bags, shoes, pants and skirts, the excuse being that the contents of our closet are completely behind the times. One has to admit that this is crazy, a fact that many people are now waking up to. Perhaps wabisabi is the answer, the “medicine” the world has been waiting for.

Plus, the world has unconsciously already started practicing wabisabi. Stores dealing in “vintage” clothing are growing in number, people are flocking to flea markets. This tendency to find beauty in the imperfect, in timeworn things, is

permeating all age groups from the young to the middle-aged and older.

Naturally, for we French to practice a “wabisabi lifestyle” requires not just a certain degree of effort, but determination as well. The ethics of wabisabi teach us that just as important as knowing when to make choices, is understanding when the idea of choice should be abandoned. The latter is the going-with-the-flow approach to life of which Mrs. Mishima spoke. Come to think of it, in the late '60s even The Beatles were singing “Let it Be” weren't they?

*This is the English rendering of a Japanese article originally translated from French.

