

VOL.8

# Are the Japanese a nation of eccentrics?

### Japan as seen through foreign eyes

Japan is a place where trends come and go with incredible rapidity.

From mobile phones encrusted in Swarovski rhinestones to the myriad permutations of “Lolita fashion,” any foreigner strolling through Harajuku or Shibuya for the first time will find much to astonish. Not to mention the nails painted in three colors and topped with glittering imitation diamonds, and the hair dyed green, white or blue. Scenes almost unthinkable in any other country. So why is this so surprising? Because the West views Japanese aesthetics through the lens of Zen and “wabisabi,” which are synonymous with simplicity stripped of all ostentation. To outsiders, garish reds and golds and all things shiny are Chinese, not Japanese.

This belief has its origins in the philosophy of Zen as introduced overseas in the Meiji period (1868-1912) by Buddhist scholar D. T. Suzuki. Suzuki used the term “wabisabi” to explain Japanese culture. Then in the Showa era (1926-1989), a German architect introduced Westerners to the Katsura Imperial Villa—built in an architectural style that is the very embodiment of simplicity—and declared it the “quintessence of Japanese aesthetics.”

Thus to those outside of Japan, “Japanese” came to mean simple, minimalist and natural.

### But on closer examination...

Around the time that the Katsura villa, with its

clean, crisp lines, was built in Kyoto, the Toshogu Shrine was under construction in Nikko. Toshogu is painted in rich hues and generously adorned with carvings of birds, flowers and so on. In fact, a tendency toward “excessive” adornment had existed in Japan since ancient times. This love of over-the-top decoration can be seen in samurai helmets, the vibrant patterns and colors of men’s and women’s kimonos, the hairstyles and hair accessories of women, and also in male headdresses. And let’s not forget those big floats adorned with lustrous brocade that inevitably make an appearance at festivals across the country.

This is why Japanese art historian Nobuo Tsuji said that “When it comes down to it, the Japanese have always had a love of the odd.” Meaning there are two coexisting cultures: one obsessed with the greatest possible adornment, and the other with stripping it all away! Japanese often speak of themselves as all being similar and lacking individuality, but having lived here for many years, I no longer believe this. On the contrary, I have never seen a country with so many different preferences and ways of thinking.

### France, on the other hand...

Compared to France, the difference is startling. In France, simplicity warrants no special mention. Simplicity is viewed as being on a par with poverty. But nor is there much eye-catching gaudy decoration. One exception would be the palace of Versailles, which Louis XIV built to impress neighboring monarchs.

Yes, the French tend to prefer all things in moderation. Compared to the Japanese, we French may not in fact be particularly diverse in our likes and dislikes. And it’s not only decoration: in France moderation is also favored when it comes to expressing emotions and perceptions. In France this makes for a peculiar mannerism: in order to avoid being seen as eccentric, perhaps,

people choose the negative form to reveal their thoughts. Rather than saying “It’s hot, isn’t it?”, they say “It’s not cold, is it?” Instead of saying “It’s cold” they say “It’s not hot”. The same when it comes to food: “Not bad, is it?” as opposed to “This is delicious”. Different countries, different customs. Here’s hoping Japan holds on to its eccentricity.



### Francoise Morechand (Fashion essayist)

Born 1936 in Montparnasse, Paris. Came to Japan in 1958 after studying Japanese at the Sorbonne. Worked as a teacher on NHK’s Tanoshii Furansugo French language education series, and lecturer in French at Ochanomizu Women’s University, before returning to France in 1964. Came to Japan again in 1974 to manage Chanel’s beauty department there. With a career spanning French teacher, TV “tarento”, writer, and fashion coordinator, in 2004 Morechand’s longstanding contribution to Franco-Japanese cultural ties was recognised by the French government with the awarding of the Légion d’honneur. Visiting professor at Kyoritsu Women’s University. Overseas trade advisor to the French government. North Asia representative for the Conseil Supérieur des Français de l’Etranger (CSFE). International advisor to the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa. Ishikawa Prefecture tourism ambassador.

### Yasuko Sensyu (Illustrator)

Leading creator of adorable “healing art”. All her work, starting with calligraphy employing her Level 7 calligraphic skills, and including her illustrations and essays, is suffused with a warmth that soothes whoever picks it up. Her diverse portfolio includes paintings for the interior of Le Comptoir de Benoit, chef Alain Ducasse’s first restaurant venture in Osaka; murals at the En-Japan head office, plus illustrating, brand logos, wall paintings and essays. She was also responsible for the “Japan Trump” playing cards showcasing famous sightseeing spots nationwide (supported by the Japan National Tourism Organization), extending this concept further across Asia with a sub-brand for the Singaporean tourism office, and Indonesian Trump cards.

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