

10 EMPTINESS" and SILENCE in Japan

When I first came in Japan in 1958, one thing that surprised Westerners when they visited Tokyo was the emptiness they discovered at the very heart of the city-- and the silence that reigned there. When they went to a museum or an antique shop, they would admire a folding screen on which a bird on a bamboo branch filled the lower register of the panels, leaving the rest of the screen empty.

"Why does this composition leave so much empty space?" They would ask.

They would have the same reaction when they listened to a conversation between two Japanese in which each party knew the value of silence. This aspect of Japanese society always surprises Westerners who spend their lives finding ways of filling emptiness. If you compare Tokyo's Imperial Palace to Paris' Elysée or London's Buckingham Palace, the latter are abuzz with activity, with the comings and goings of visitors, of the guards in their gaudy uniforms and the tourists photographing them.

What then is this thing that we Westerners call "emptiness," because we lack a better word to define it? The experience of "emptiness" in Japan is nothing more than a creation of the Western mindset. For the Japanese, what we call emptiness is full ... of itself. Such is the Emperor's presence, which is all the more potent because it is shrouded in mystery; or the greater weight of a speech if we know how to express ourselves but also when to keep quiet. In both these cases, seeing "fullness" in "emptiness" becomes a creative act. Therein lies the unique genius of the Japanese people: to create something out of nothing. Look at

Bizen pottery--a great deal of clay and a dearth of money have conspired to create one of the world's great ceramic traditions; in architecture: A succession of rooms devoid of furnishing creates the aesthetics of space known as ma; the underemployed samurai with too much time on his hands, who transformed everyday acts into rituals that took three hours to accomplish.

And what of the famous tea ceremony, with its well-heeled, leisured guests, that takes place in an empty room--is it not the ultimate celebration of "emptiness"? It is in the tea ceremony that we find the most explicit expression of emptiness, with its artfully worked simplicity and its ostentatious poverty. The Way of Tea is the origin of wabi sabi, a philosophy of striking simplicity, of objects created out of nothing, of cracked vases containing a single wild flower--a whole aesthetic that the Japanese consider to be the acme of good taste. This lifestyle did not come about by chance. Something is created out of nothing because it has become necessary. When a Japanese carpenter planes a wooden floor, he will stop when he reaches what he considers to be the most beautiful grain in the wood. The questions that Zen monks ask are devoid of meaning--it's up to you to create one. Zen constantly fights against the trap of the single meaning. To give a question a single answer circumscribes and fixes its meaning forever. In other words, it shuts off all other possibilities. In contrast, emptiness leaves the door open to a multiplicity of choices.

The West has chosen the single answer while Japan leaves the way open to many alternative solutions. The West is an oak tree that is strong but will break in the storm; Japan is bamboo that bends but does not break. But does this still hold



true in contemporary Japan? Do carpenters still plane their wooden floors? Do empty rooms still exist? Are they not filled with televisions, DVD players, fridge freezers, microwave ovens, video games consoles, and beds instead of futons? Haven't the tea ceremony and flower arranging succumbed to "big business"? Hasn't the emptiness that gave people the space to think and reflect,

and by extension, to create, made way for a new religion with three simple commandments: "Consume, consume, consume"? The French philosopher René Descartes wrote, "I think therefore I am," but the twenty-first century's philosophy seems to be, "I buy therefore I am."

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'Étranger (CSFE). International advisor to the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa. Ishikawa Prefecture tourism ambassador.

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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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