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# WA

THE  
ESSENCE  
OF  
JAPANESE  
DESIGN



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P A P E R 126

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## THE ORIGINS OF JAPANESE DESIGN KENYA HARA

To understand Japanese design, it is helpful to understand the genealogy of the aesthetics behind it. Japan has sustained cultural homogeneity for over a thousand years. The present era is naturally a continuation of this. At a glance Japanese design looks simple, but its simplicity differs from that discovered by Western modernism, which was based on rationality. I call the simplicity of Japanese design 'emptiness'. Instead of disseminating a precise, articulate message, extreme plainness – emptiness – can invite a variety of interpretations, just like an empty vessel. The Noh masks used in the traditional Japanese musical theatre wear a plain expression, with no sign of the human emotions of joy, anger, pathos or humour. Whether they appear to be crying or laughing depends on the context of the performance. The universality born from these plain expressions allows for the insertion of any emotion that might be imagined. This kind of emptiness is reflected in Japan's architecture, spaces, gardens, ikebana and poetry, as well as in contemporary design. When looking at Japanese culture armed with knowledge of this concept, a number of things become apparent that perhaps we hadn't noticed before.

### SIMPLICITY AND WESTERN MODERNISM

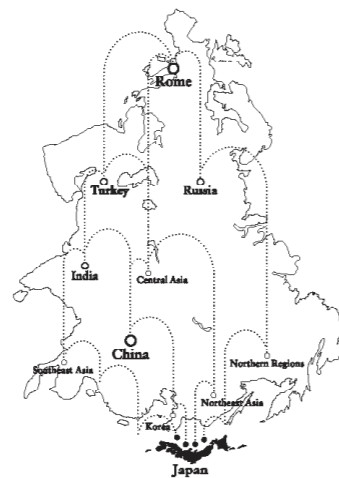
The difference between emptiness and simplicity deserves an explanation. Without risking misunderstanding, I suggest the concept of 'simplicity' began with European modernism. The world came into being out of complexity. In both the East and the West, at the dawn of civilization when sole rulers governed, objects were covered with gorgeous decorations to symbolize power. Yet, with the advent of modern society, eras in which citizens were no longer ruled by royalty and titled nobility, the relationship between objects and people underwent a revolutionary change. As people began to live more freely, there came a change in the way they thought about art, ideology, literature, artefacts and clothing. The idea of a necessary review of the relationship between functionality, materials and form through the perspective of rationality came into being. From the first World Exposition held in London in 1851 to the creation of Bauhaus in 1909 and the founding of Domus in 1928 in Milan by the architect, Giò Ponti, a concept of simplicity that pivoted on rationality began to penetrate world culture. Subsequently, Western modernism has made unfathomable contributions to modern civilization, from which we continue to learn from today.

### THE APPLICATION OF EMPTINESS

More than 300 years prior to that era, in mid-fifteenth century Japan, a simple, plain style had been established. In the days when elaborate forms were sweeping the rest of the world, simplicity had already been attained in Japan. Why? Let's take a closer look.

First of all, there is the geographical factor. Japan is an archipelago at the margin of the world that lies on the outskirts of the eastern end of the Eurasian continent. Let's make a 90-degree clockwise rotation of this map.

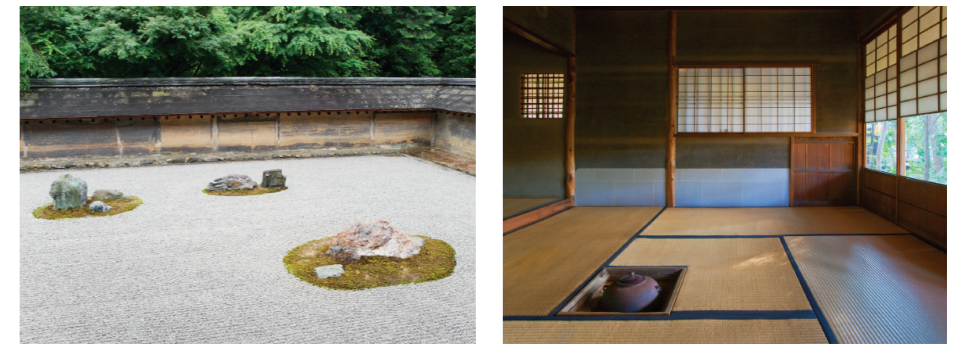
If we imagine Eurasia as a pachinko machine (pinball machine), the Japanese archipelago is precisely where the ball catch would be. The top of our Eurasian pachinko game, from which all the balls descend, is around Rome. Culture takes the Silk Road, leading to China and the Korean Peninsula, eventually descending into Japan. Advancing as they bounce around, some balls come through the maritime Silk Road, from Southeast Asia via India, and others through Russia; as you can see, Japan has been a receptacle of cultures from all over the world. Because it was an era when the world was overflowing with flamboyant decorations symbolizing power, Japanese culture was equally dazzling.



However, at one particular point, simplicity emerged. A revolutionary 'resetting' of Japanese culture took place in the middle of the fifteenth century just after the civil war known as Ōnin no Ran. Spanning ten years, the destruction of Buddhist temples, Buddhist statues, paintings, calligraphic works and kimonos resulted in an enormous cultural loss.

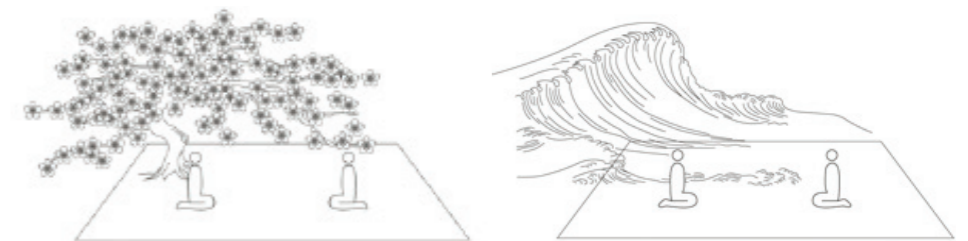


The shogun of the day, Ashikaga Yoshimasa, had no political power, but he did have a keen sense of aesthetics. Weary of the ongoing hostilities, he relinquished his position to his son and retired to the Higashiyama area of Kyoto. Having built a residence reflecting his personal tastes and preferences, he began to lead a life in pursuit of aesthetic experiences. Perhaps due to a philosophical resignation arising from enormous cultural loss, a taste for the simple and quiet – a sensibility favouring bleak, rustic beauty – had emerged. While the interest in articles imported from China and other foreign locales remained as strong as it had previously, during this period there came into existence an appreciation unique to Japan, one inclined to face the world through ultimate simplicity.



This was also the period of the peculiar development of Zen Buddhism in Japan (introduced from China) and the appearance of abstract gardens such as karesansui (dry landscape, or rock gardens). In Yoshimasa's Dojin-sai (study), a space said to be the origin of the traditional Japanese-style room, the vocabulary is complete, including tatami flooring (made of woven straw), shōji (translucent paper sliding doors) that allow for surface lighting, and fusuma (paper-covered sliding doors). A desktop writing platform called a chodai is placed in front of a set of shōji: once opened the garden's landscape unfolds in the proportions of a hanging scroll. In this era, an aesthetic sense came into being that recognized the richness of this extremely simple and empty space – precisely because of this empty aspect – because it calls forth a great variety of images and imagination.

During this period, as Yoshimasa appointed talented people (regardless of their social or family status), those who served using their gifts in landscape gardening, tatehana (the oldest style of ikebana), painting, space design, dance and so forth came into the limelight. These talented individuals, known as Doboshu (those of the priest-artist guild) appear to represent the ancestors of Japan's designers. They were: ikebana founder, Ryu-ami; Zen'ami, who exercised his talent as a landscape gardener; Nōami and his grandson Sōami, who compiled Kundaikansochoki (the book of secrets on the appreciation of subtleties concerning the works of Chinese art and ways to arrange ornamental objects), and who so proficiently decorated rooms conforming to individual events as well as excelling at painting. Kan'ami and his son Zeami, who established the present form of the Noh play, belonged to this same genealogy.

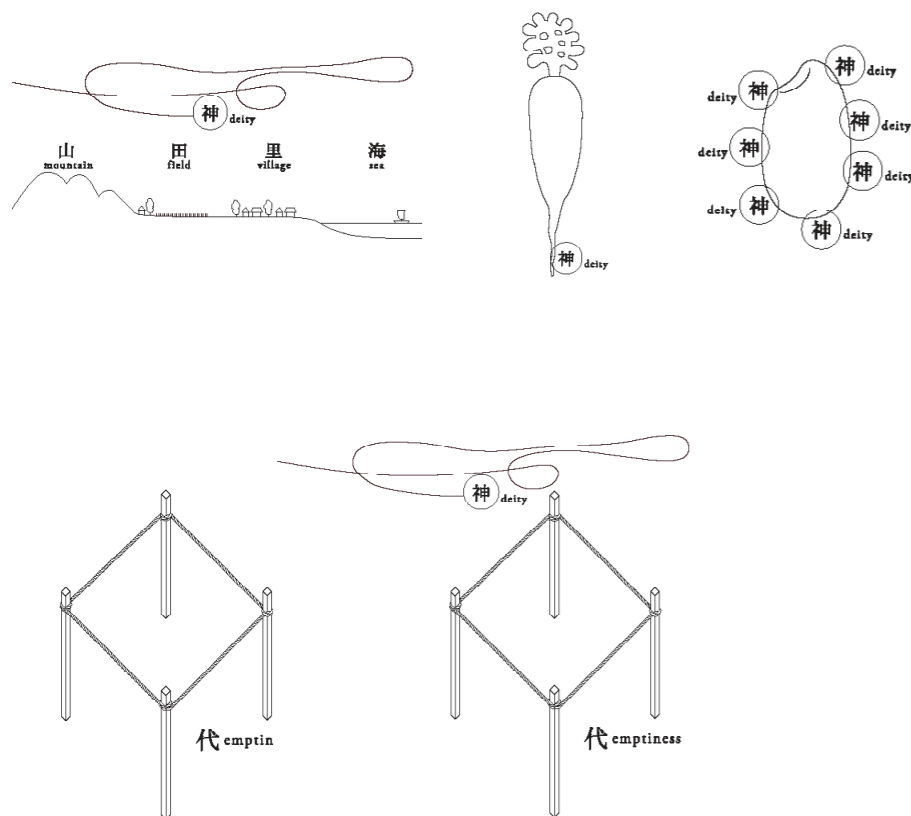


Emptiness was completely achieved by Sen no Rikyū, the tea master who perfected cha-no-yu (the tea ceremony) during the Momoyama era (1573–1615). In cha-no-yu, master and guest engage in deep communication face to face in the chashitsu (tea room), an empty space of ultimate simplicity. The sole decorations are a flower display and a painted scroll

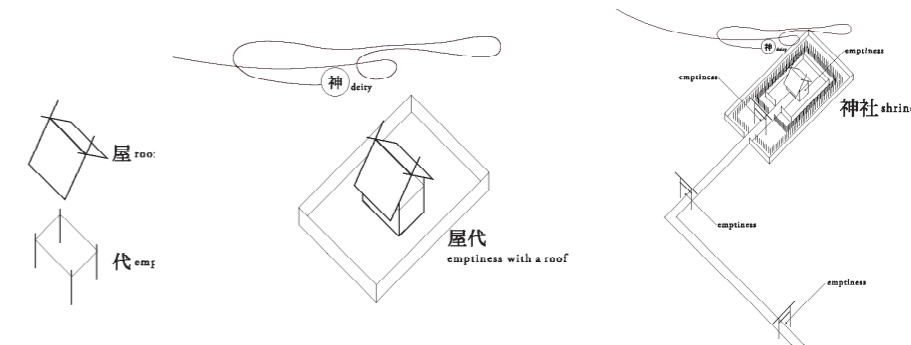
placed in an alcove, as a unified whole. With the slightest of changes to this simple arrangement, the chashitsu can become an alcove under a cherry tree in full bloom, or the seashore, awash with crashing waves. Cha-no-yu utilizes emptiness, evolving as performance art that freely deposits imagination into – and withdraws imagination from – that emptiness.

### THE ORIGIN OF EMPTINESS

The primordial sense of emptiness extends back to ancient times. The ancient Japanese believed that wisdom resided within nature, and humans lived by virtue of that natural wisdom. They believed that gods were in the midst of nature, everywhere, flying above the clouds, crouching by the rice paddies, lurking in the sea; everywhere at once. In Japan they're known as Yaoyorozu no Kami (the myriad gods). A common image associated with them is that of 'a god at the root end of every daikon radish you pull', and even today it is said that seven gods live on each grain of rice.



The Japanese people devised a mechanism to make some point of contact with the gods dwelling in nature, who were impossible to touch. They put up four thin stakes in four corners and stretch a single rope around them all, creating an empty unit or space. Because empty equals the possibility of being filled, the gods may then find it and enter. There's no certainty that they will, but the Japanese of ancient times embraced the feelings of trepidation and prayer engendered by the possibility that the gods might choose to dwell there.



This square, empty unit bound with rope is called shiro. When a yane (roof) is attached to this shiro, a yashiro is made. Enclosed by a hedge or fence, it becomes the basic Shinto shrine. With this, the possibility that gods may enter this empty space takes structural form. The nucleus of a shrine is emptiness, and it is to this possibility that we pray.

### THE MECHANISM BEARING ORIGINALITY

Next to the yashiro of the Ise Grand Shrine, one of the most important Shinto shrines in Japan, there is yet another, separate emptiness: a vacant lot. Every twenty years at the Ise Shrine there is an event known as Shikinen Sengu, during which the entire shrine is completely demolished and a new one built. Perhaps it's a good idea to preserve past heritage by having something designated as a World Heritage site so that no one can touch it, but Japanese preservation is achieved by updating through complete reconstruction of the same structure. Because it's performed once every twenty years, a designated shrine carpenter assumes leadership for that year's rebuilding ceremony, and his disciple carpenter will become the master builder twenty years later.



The blueprint of the shrine is also re-drafted completely, so the reproduced shrine naturally differs slightly from the previous one. 2013 marks the 62nd Shikinen Sengu, celebrating a practice that has already taken place for more than 1,200 years. Therefore, the present Ise Shrine is likely very different from the original one. In this change lies the greatest benefit of the passing on of a tradition. The roots of the Ise Shrine's architectural style are Polynesian, a Pacific Ocean culture, not an influence from Rome or