



Cornell University Southeast Asia Program

Buddhism and Japanese Aesthetics

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Introduction

This unit provides a general introduction to three aesthetic concepts—*mono no aware*, *wabi-sabi*, and *yūgen* — that are basic to the Japanese arts and “ways” (*dō*).⁽¹⁾ Secondly, it traces some of the Buddhist (and Shintō)⁽²⁾ influences on the development of the Japanese aesthetic sensibility.

In addition to introducing students to the concepts of *mono no aware*, *wabi-sabi*, and *yūgen*, the unit provides students with an opportunity to study the appearance of these concepts in Japanese art and life through an examination of images and texts. Furthermore, students are introduced to the relationship between these concepts and Buddhism, and hence the larger significance of these ideas.

Each aesthetic idea is introduced with a paradigmatic example in order to offer a tangible image to connect with the general features defining each aesthetic category. The “Aesthetic Characteristics” section provides a basic description of the defining qualities associated with each aesthetic concept and how the concept has been used across various artistic disciplines. The “Philosophical Significance” section explores the relationship between the defining features belonging to a particular aesthetic idea and the Buddhist (as well as Shintō) ideas contributing to its significance.

Audience and Uses

The unit is designed to be employed in a variety of ways and across a wide range of contexts. It can be incorporated into a wide range of classes including but not limited to Asian art, Asian literature, Asian or comparative philosophy, or Buddhism. Each aesthetic concept can be treated as a stand-alone module (approximately one classroom hour) or the entire unit can be used across several classes (approximately three classroom hours).

Moreover, the unit can be successfully integrated with additional units to create a larger course of study on Buddhism, Buddhist Aesthetics, Buddhist Literature, etc. See also:

- [Buddhism in the Classic Chinese Novel *Journey to the West*](#)
- [Buddhist Art in East Asia: Three Introductory Lessons Towards Visual Literacy](#)
- [Dialogue and Transformation: Buddhism in Asian Philosophy](#)
- [Foundations and Transformations of Buddhism: An Overview](#)
- [Japanese Aesthetics and *The Tale of Genji*](#)
- [Ox-herding: Stages of Zen Practice](#)

Section I: *Mono No Aware*

Classic Example: Cherry Blossoms



From: [The Plum Village Photo Album](#)

Attachments: *Mono no Aware* : Readings

Mono no Aware : Discussion Questions

Mono no Aware : Aesthetic Characteristics

Section II: *Wabi-Sabi*

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Classic Example: Tea Hut



From: [Mountain Light Sanctuary](#)

The snow-covered mountain path
Winding through the rocks
Has come to its end;
Here stands a hut,
The master is all alone;
No visitors he has,
Nor are any expected.

Sen no Rikyū (1521-1591)

(D.T. SUZUKI, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959, p. 282)

Attachments

[Wabi-Sabi : Readings](#)

[Discussion Questions](#)

[Background \(Aesthetic Characteristics, and Philosophical Significance\): Wabi-Sabi](#)

Section III: *Yūgen*

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Principal Example: Mountains and Clouds



From: [Jimages Photography](#)

*Gaze out far enough,
Beyond all cherry blossoms
and scarlet maples,
to those huts by the harbor
fading in the autumn dusk.*

FUJIWARA Teika (1162-1241)

(William LAFLEUR, *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan*.
Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983, p. 97.)

Attachments

Yūgen : Readings

Yūgen : Discussion Questions

Background (Aesthetic Characteristics and Philosophical Significance: *Yūgen*)

Further Reading and Web Resources