



## Cornell University Southeast Asia Program

### Background Information: Mono No Aware

#### Mono no Aware : Aesthetic Characteristics

The aesthetic category of *mono no aware* (物の哀れ), or the “poignant beauty of things,” describes a cultivated sensitivity to the unavoidable transience of the world. Due to their vivid fragility, cherry blossoms, which are easily scattered by the slightest wind or rain, have become the archetypal symbol of the melancholic beauty of impermanence — the transitory presence of the cherry blossom intensifies the experience by underscoring the blossoms’ delicate beauty. *Mono no aware* foregrounds finite existence within the flow of experience and change.

Since *mono no aware* developed as an everyday expression of pathos, it resides at the center of the Japanese premodern aesthetic sensibility and thereby has become something of a broad aesthetic category. However, since the interpretation of MOTOORI Norinaga (1730-1801) *mono no aware* has been most notably associated with literary texts like Heian (794-1185) court poetry (*waka* — Chinese-style poetry in Japan) and *The Tale of Genji* by MURASAKI Shikibu (ca. 1010).

#### *Mono no Aware* : Philosophical Significance

The notion of *mono no aware* originates in the indigenous Shintō (神道) sensibility, which was highly sensitive to the awe-inspiring dimensions of the natural world. As a religious sensibility, *mono no aware* is related to two other notions, namely, “the vitality of things” (*mono no ke* 物の気) and “the mood of things” (*mono no kokoro* 物の心).

- The vitality of things concerns the vital energy (*ke*) exuded by real world things (*mono*). For example, the gates or archways (*torii* 鳥居) of shrines and temples originally were meant to have a vital energy and therefore served as a sacred place with cosmic charisma. (See <http://www.exeas.org/resources/photos/shrinegates.jpg> for an image of shrine gates.)

In terms of religious practice, Shintō aims at the cultivation of heightened openness. In other words, one strives to capture “the mood of things” (*mono no kokoro*) or feel the tangible world, thereby realizing a profound sympathetic resonance with one’s environment. To be affectively and cognitively attuned to the things around us is the most intimate form of knowledge — that is, to know the heart-mind (*kokoro*) of a thing (*mono*).

- Thus, *mono no ke* and *mono no kokoro* provide the background against which *mono no aware* emerges as an aesthetic notion. *Mono no aware*, then, represents a refined

sensibility indicating a sincere heart capable of resonating with the vital energy of things in a constantly changing world.

With the introduction of Buddhism into Japan, the awareness of the world as a process became explicitly conceived as “impermanence” (*mujō* 無常 — literally, “without constancy”). The traditional Buddhist attention to the problem of “angst” or “suffering” (Sanskrit *dukkha*) in the face of the impermanence of things became aestheticized in Japan. *Mono no aware* is not only a living realization of impermanence, but also an aesthetic orientation towards the deep beauty inherent in the transitory nature of existence.