

**The Japanese Aesthetic
A Conversation with Jennifer Casler,
Curator of Asian Art,
Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas**

Which term, Asian, or Oriental, is correct in referring to Japan?

When discussing Japanese culture, the term Asian is more appropriate than Oriental. Asian refers to all cultures whose mother culture was China. Japan is one of these cultures. The term Oriental would include Assyrian and other cultures.

What can you tell us about symbolism in Japanese prints and paintings?

Prints always have clues in them. In a restrained way, they have implied meaning. There is symbolism in the particular birds depicted or in the flowers or other subject matter. For example, spring could be a symbol of youth. As far as Hokusai's eagle (in the painting *Eagle in a Snowstorm*) being a symbol of old age, eagles and hawks are popular subjects in Japanese painting as military symbols such as samurai.

Often the way symbols came about was because of the limited phonetic pronunciation which characterizes Asian languages. An example is from the Chinese language. The word for "bat" is pronounced Foo, but the word for "prosperity" is also pronounced Foo. Written, the characters for the two words are different, but pronounced, they have the same sound. This is very similar to our Western homonyms like "read" and "reed", or "sea" and "see". Therefore, the two concepts (prosperity and bats) become associated with one another.

Is Japanese art made in the tradition of personal self-expression or the tradition of conformity?

As far as the ordinary being revered, it has to do with the idea that every blade of grass is imbued with a spirit.

Conformity is valued politically. Politically, Japanese society was under the rule of an emperor whose power was based on divinity. The Japanese person's number one responsibility was to the ruler. His number two responsibility was to his parents, and individuality was pretty far down the line as a priority.

But art is the one way in which one could express his own individuality. In art, it's okay. Conformity and repetition would be stale in art. Artists reinterpreted the past and made it their own. They were constantly recycling with their own twist, while never forgetting tradition.

How can some of the principles of nature that are revered by the Japanese be explained?

Perishability: Taoist thought is that the world is constantly in a state of flux and change.

There is a sense of time constantly moving on -- of being caught up in cyclical changes. That's why seasons are such an important theme. There is the sense of constant change in the motion of the universe.

Incompleteness: What we see as "empty space" (such as in a print) is not necessarily "empty" to the Japanese. They see it as "full of something." It's kind of like the idea of some people seeing a glass half empty while others see the same glass as half full. It depends on your viewpoint.

Imperfection/Spontaneity: The "happy accident" applies very much to brush painting and Zen ideas of constant change. This aspect of nature is less applicable to prints due to the very technical process by which they are produced.

Simplicity: In portraiture, the patterns of the costumes and the actions of the women distinguish their portraits. They have idealized faces and images more like caricature. Kabuki theater prints of characters in costume are absolutely caricatures, capturing the actor in the act. There is energy in the expression on their faces. But here "caricature" doesn't just mean funny. Rather, they are trying to portray an ideal way of life and ideal of beauty and their love of decoration and color and restrained, veiled, contained movement.

Functionality: The posture of the eagle on the rock is an example. It looks like the storm is fierce, but the eagle is very stable on the rock. This is indicated by his feet. The look on his face is determination (attitude). There obviously has been attention given to depicting the bird's feathers and claws. This is an attempt at realism in the Japanese sense. There is functionality between the free, loose rendering of the rocks and the storm, and the fine, detailed lines in the eagle.

from an interview conducted by Diane McClure