

# APA Newsletters

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**FROM THE EDITOR,** DAVID H. KIM

**ARTICLE**

A. MINH NGUYEN  
“Report on ‘Japanese Aesthetics’”

**BOOK REVIEW**

Yubraj Aryal: *The Humanities at Work: International Exchange  
of Ideas in Aesthetics, Philosophy, and Literature*

REVIEWED BY ARUN KUMAR POKHREL





# Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies

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David H. Kim, Editor

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## FROM THE EDITOR

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**David H. Kim**

*University of San Francisco*

This edition of the *Newsletter* includes a detailed report of a committee-sponsored panel on Japanese aesthetics. Peter Leech, Mara Miller, Yuriko Saito, and Barbara Sandrisser presented papers on the work or relevance of such figures as Kuki Shūzō, Kawabata Yasunari, and Sei Shonagon. Just before he ended his term on this committee, A. Minh Nguyen both organized this panel and submitted this report. Also included in this edition is Arun Kumar Pokhrel's review of a volume edited by Yubraj Aryal, *The Humanities at Work: International Exchange of Ideas in Aesthetics, Philosophy, and Literature*, a collection of interviews marked by philosophical exchanges between the interviewer, Aryal, and his interviewees, including Hilary Putnam, John Searle, and others. Many thanks to Minh, Arun, and Yubraj for their contributions.

In July, the membership of the committee typically changes as some members complete their terms of service and new terms begin. So with the opportunity afforded by this *Newsletter*, I would like to thank Kyoo Lee and Ronald Sundstrom for their excellent work on behalf of the committee and the profession. As well, I would like to acknowledge two incoming members, Prasanta S. Bandyopadhyay and Emily S. Lee.

Prasanta S. Bandyopadhyay is a professor of philosophy at Montana State University (MSU) and an affiliate to MSU's Astrobiology Biogeocatalysis Research Center supported by NASA's origin of life research grant. His specializations are philosophy of science and epistemology, and his area of competence is in Indian philosophy. Bandyopadhyay has developed a (quasi-objective) Bayesian approach to address some of the long-standing issues in epistemology of science, like the underdetermination problem, the Duhem-Quine thesis, the severity of theory-testing issues, the curve-fitting problem, and the old evidence problem. He has published several papers in his areas of specialization in such journals as the *Philosophy of Science*, *Synthese*, *Proceedings of the Philosophy of Science Association (PSA)*, and *International Studies in Philosophy of Science*. He has co-edited *Handbook of Philosophy of Statistics* (Elsevier, 2011) with Malcolm R. Forster. He has recently been given a "Faculty Development Award (2012-2013)" to pursue his on-going research on Indian philosophy in India.

Emily S. Lee is associate professor of philosophy at California State University at Fullerton. Her research interests include feminist philosophy, philosophy of race, and phenomenology. She has published articles on phenomenology and epistemology in regards to the embodiment of women of

color. She is currently working on a monograph concerning the phenomenology of race and an anthology on phenomenology, embodiment, and race ([elee@fullerton.edu](mailto:elee@fullerton.edu)).

Welcome, Prasanta and Emily!

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## ARTICLE

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### *Report on "Japanese Aesthetics"*

**A. Minh Nguyen**

*Eastern Kentucky University*

#### Introduction

What is the aesthetic vision of Kuki Shūzō? How do his literary and philosophical writings elucidate and expand the idea of an olfactory aesthetics? Why do Japanese writers such as Kawabata Yasunari and Nakazawa Keiji, and film directors such as Yamada Tengu and Masaki Mori, return to classical aesthetics in order to deal with the horrors of the post-nuclear age? What are the effects of this return to tradition—on the work of art itself and on the audience? Does Japanese aesthetics suggest important ways in which aesthetic experiences and activities help cultivate a moral sensibility both in the practitioners and in the appreciators, thereby making a contribution to the improvement of the quality of life and the state of the world? If so, what are these aesthetic-cum-moral ways of world-making? What is Sei Shonagon's notion of elegance and how does it manifest itself in Japanese life and culture? Would the Japanese put aside elegance and other aesthetic notions forever after the March 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent explosion of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant's oldest reactor?

Four papers devoted to the above cluster of topics were presented at the 108th Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association's Eastern Division at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel in Washington, D.C., on Thursday, December 29, 2011, at 1:30 p.m. The three-hour uninterrupted session, entitled "Japanese Aesthetics," took place in the main program under the auspices of the APA Committee on the Status of Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies. **A. Minh Nguyen** (Eastern Kentucky University) organized and chaired the session. Widely published in the field of Japanese aesthetics, the speakers included **Peter Leech** (University of Otago, New Zealand and Universidad Iberoamericana, México), **Mara Miller** (Artistic Consultant and Independent Scholar), **Yuriko Saito** (Rhode Island School of Design), and **Barbara Sandrisser** (Architectural and Environmental Aesthetics). Twenty people attended the session. Below are extended abstracts of the papers presented.

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## Scents and Sensibility: Kuki Shūzō and Olfactory Aesthetics (Peter Leech)

In a poignant episode on his arrival in Paris from Tokyo in 1924, the Japanese aesthetician Kuki Shūzō confesses that he began to sprinkle his vest with the legendary Guerlain perfume, *Bouquet de Faunes*. But this is not, I believe, an inconsequential quirk of an aspiring young aesthete in an unfamiliar country. For again and again in Kuki's writings, we encounter an insistent olfactory imagery, no more gnominically so than in his remark from a much later essay, "Dentō to Shinshu" ("Tradition and Progressivism") (1936): "I have indeed the smell of the traditional past. My love for tradition, however, is not as faint as a scent." My purpose here, however, is not merely to consider the many delicacies of Kuki's aesthetic thought. Rather I want to extend consideration to the neglected topic of the aesthetics of the sense of smell, and the question of the degree to which—at least for Kuki—there may be a distinctively Japanese inflection to the idea of an olfactory aesthetics.

In §1 *The Scents of Kuki*, I elaborate on the Japanese and olfactory elements of Kuki's writings: not just his formal aesthetics but also his poetic and autobiographical writings. But there is also, in my view, an interesting—if tangential—matter to consider. Sometimes Kuki writes as an aesthete rather than an aesthetician, and this is certainly uncommon. Aesthetes are generally too much absorbed in the phenomenology of their own sensibilities to pay much attention to its conceptual formalization. But, the other way round, I sometimes find myself faintly dismayed that philosophical aestheticians are rarely aesthetes as well, and not characteristically disposed to consider nuances of sensibility as their primary object. Perhaps Walter Pater was an exception, and it is tempting to consider Kuki as a Japanese counterpart of Pater. Yet with Kuki there can be a more conceptually muscular approach, as, for instance, expressed in one of his poems from Paris:

The heart says  
"Lately it hurts"  
After a while  
The soul says  
"Go back to Kant"

It is with this prompt that in §2 *Kuki's Kant*, I consider some ways in which Kuki seems to have absorbed aspects of Kant's aesthetics. The intrigue, however, is that Kuki is prepared aesthetically to contemplate olfactory sensations, whereas for Kant smell is an inferior sense which is identified *only* as a modality of the agreeable (or, more often, the *disagreeable*), and which thus cannot figure in any construction of aesthetic delight involving both sensation and cognition. Indeed, Kant claims, "we cannot even describe smell" since it lacks "appellations" (in contrast with, say, color-names). Or, to put it another way, and in another voice (that of the British psychoanalytical critic of art, Adrian Stokes):

We swallow smell whole, as it were, and in doing so we may become enveloped or possessed. We are little interested in the composite nature of smells, their parts and correspondences. Consequently, for this reason alone, there is no art of smell, since art depends upon an additive or balancing process between parts.

Yet Kuki, I believe, would demur. To be sure, he would not go so far as to claim that there *is* an art of smell, or that Kant is mistaken in thinking that smell does not have the formal structures of visual or auditory sensations. However, I find evidence that, with Kuki, olfactory sensation does bear significantly on aesthetic experience in at least two conceptual aspects which run through his writings. The first is the idea of the

indescribability—or unrepresentability—of smell; the second is the idea of the contingent, both in general and aesthetically. It is to these two matters that I turn in a concluding section, §3 *The Unrepresentable and the Contingent*.

It is perhaps surprising that Kant should take such a negative view of olfactory sensation. For, of course, in his fundamental notion of an "aesthetic idea," it is precisely the indescribability of an aesthetic experience which is so crucial. As Kant puts it:

But, by an aesthetic idea I mean that representation of the imagination which induces much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e. concept, being adequate to it, and which language, consequently, can never get quite on level terms with or render completely intelligible.

By contrast, for Kuki, olfactory experience is *peculiarly* relevant to Kant's point, as in his echoing remark about "a hazy fragrance that is difficult to grasp... It is movement indescribable in words."

As for olfactory contingency, my conviction is that for Kuki it focused a philosophical fascination he had with the *general* idea of the contingent. We find this fascination particularly in Kuki's awareness of a fundamental problem of Euclidean geometry: namely, the absence of any logical proof for Euclid's Parallel Postulate. Of course it is true that parallel lines do not intersect; the problem is that it is not *analytically* true. As Kuki puts it in his poetic homage to Euclid—*Gūzensai*—again written in Paris:

The principle that two parallel lines do not intersect  
To the intersection of parallel lines don't you object?  
With this, contingency is fulfilled.

With smells, too, there is always an epistemic contingency. The particular problem here is that olfactory sensation seems to be unbounded both in structure and in effect. For the most part, for most of us, a scent may at most induce a flow of associative memories—much like the taste of a piece of madeleine dipped in tisane did for Proust. But for Kuki, there seems to be something more: a *bounded* contingency, if I may put it this way. This may in fact be the way to explain Kuki's strange remark, quoted in the opening paragraph, that "I have indeed the smell of the traditional [Japanese] past. My love for tradition, however, is not as faint as a scent." What I take Kuki to mean is that his aesthetic sensibility is not simply an *association* with Japanese tradition, but rather an expression of it. This claim would certainly also help to make sense of Kuki's notorious claim from *Iki no kōzō* (1930) that his central aesthetic concept of *iki* lies buried in "the hermeneutics of ethnic being."

However, to draw together my concerns with Kuki's scents and sensibility, I close with another of his Parisian poems in which we hear both the aesthete and the aesthetician:

My heart smells  
A fragrance similar  
To the *iki* of my homeland  
In the figure of Renée  
On a spring night.

It is perhaps the most startling of all Kuki's turns of mind: namely, the idea that one might be able to *smell* the fragrance of what he takes to be a fundamental Japanese aesthetic *concept*.

## Japanese Post-War Literary Aesthetics: Rewriting the Traditional in the Post-Atomic World (Mara Miller)

Oddly, we find structural similarities in the aesthetics of two successful but very different Japanese post-atomic bombing narratives: *The Sound of the Mountain*, a novel by Yasunari Kawabata, Japan's first Nobel Prize winner for literature, and the

anime film *Barefoot Gen* about the bombing of Hiroshima. Both deal with the aftermath of World War II in Japan. Both employ “traditional” aesthetics among others in complex ways. (An earlier version of the argument about *Barefoot Gen* was read to the Center for Japanese Studies at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa in September 2011. An article based on that talk, “Making Historic Terror Tolerable to Children: *Barefoot Gen* and *Grave of the Fireflies*,” is under review, as is “Reinventing Values: Aesthetics as Philosophical Exploration of Self, Subject, and Moral Agency in Kawabata’s *The Sound of the Mountain*,” which covers that aspect of the present argument in greater detail.)

Both *The Sound of the Mountain* and *Barefoot Gen* adopt similar aesthetic strategies, returning to a variety of classical aesthetics in order to reestablish connection and rebuild society. Why do Kawabata and the film-makers return to classical aesthetics in order to deal with the horrors of the post-nuclear age? What are the effects of this return to tradition—on the work of art itself and on the viewers?

Two common views of the uses of “traditional” aesthetics in the twentieth century are that they are nostalgia—“bad faith” evasions of modern problems—and that their primary function is nation-building. I believe, by contrast, that Japanese art in general and these two works in particular function as cognitive prostheses—that is, as “tools” that both extend cognition, emotion, social intelligence, and ethical awareness, and teach skills in these areas. If so, the return to traditional aesthetics, found not only in these works but also more broadly, has been a vital step in the reconstitution of Japanese subjectivity, intelligence, and sociality. To demonstrate this thesis requires more space than we have here. This paper, therefore, addresses the ways in which two highly divergent works, made under very different circumstances and for different audiences, take up themes of traditional aesthetics to cope with the worst of modern problems. Traditional aesthetics reminds viewers of what predecessors have suffered and how they have coped, and resuscitates our sense of the legitimacy of joy and hope.

The two works differ in a number of respects: audience, genre (novel vs. anime film, memoir vs. fiction), and the directness with which they face the issues. *The Sound of the Mountain* is (deliberately) vaguer, indefinite, and allusive—qualities that themselves are adaptations of the eleventh-century aesthetics of Murasaki Shikibu’s Heian-era novel *The Tale of Genji*, composed sometime between 1000 and 1014. The anime film, *Barefoot Gen*, explicitly and graphically shows the effects of the atomic bombing on individuals. More interesting are the similarities between the two works: their modern themes (urbanization, industrialization, mechanization, anonymity in warfare and among social institutions, the nature of individual consciousness and responsibility, and the effects of war on individuals) and the subject of the nuclear bombing of Japan. Kawabata relies heavily on stream of consciousness, a distinctively modernist technique. He also explores the individual’s consciousness of the unreliability of his own memory, a phenomenon at the core of self-reflection and the awareness of self. At the same time, Kawabata’s writing could almost be considered postmodern, insofar as there is deliberate borrowing from many other periods and juxtaposing them for one’s own purposes.

In *The Sound of the Mountain*, as in some other works, Kawabata utilizes traditional aesthetics in three ways. First, he cites specific artworks that characters own, look at, or use, whose specific connotations carry weight psychologically, symbolically, and as cultural capital. Second, like complex textiles of Noh robes, or like certain illustrated hand scrolls, this novel is comprised of different patterns built up in layers. (The analogy between the form of the novel and hand scrolls has

been suggested by Donald Keene.) The intricacy, complexity, and subtlety of such visual works are demonstrably analogous to Kawabata’s literary style in this novel. Third, the novel’s aesthetics is clearly derived from classical sources, borrowing from Murasaki Shikibu such aesthetic values as elegance and allusion (in both senses: avoidance of the explicit and as opposed to symbolism), as well as from various medieval (Kamakura-period) texts. (Note that this integration is complex, insofar as Heian-era and Kamakura-period aesthetics were to a great extent antithetical.)

*Barefoot Gen*’s visual language derives from ancient and recent artistic forms. It includes point-of-view techniques and a structuring of architecture within the *mise-en-scène* that embody anxiety and insecurity, techniques adapted from Heian-era illustrated hand scrolls, while its use of graphic depictions of disease and warfare stem from Kamakura-period paintings. Early modern (seventeenth- to eighteenth-century) woodblock prints also contribute: a reveling in details of daily life; types of composition; rich patterns; intimate scale; a certain use of landscape that underscores social and emotional life, and unusual points of view taken from master woodblock artists such as Katsushika Hokusai (for example, showing the landscape through the spokes of a wheel); gradations of color; use of color that suits the emotion; and exploitation of emotional (rather than realistic) atmospheric qualities that are overwhelmingly beautiful. *Barefoot Gen* also shows the reliance on the beauty of nature and a grounding of narrative and art in the seasonal that have pervaded the last fifteen hundred years of Japanese poetry and prose. Poetic themes, such as the full moon and cherry-blossom viewing, are age-old sources of joy and aesthetic pleasure. Their effect is to suggest that culture can be reinstated *even though* it has been destroyed (a destruction we now know to be temporary but that did not seem so then). *Awake*, keen appreciation of the poignant beauty of the moment in spite of its transience, a major aesthetic in Japan for a millennium, and the more Zen-like emphasis on the sensory experience of the moment, similar to the focus on the sound of water boiling or being poured in a tea ceremony, also derived from ancient Japanese aesthetics, are also both found in *Barefoot Gen*.

Although a classic sense of beauty pervades Kawabata’s prose, equally pervasive is his profound concern—revealed through art and aesthetics—with moral agency and the limits of (rather than the *limitations on*) the person—both to act effectively on his own behalf and on behalf of others, and to discern the right thing in an increasingly incomprehensible world. Similarly, through its aesthetic beauty and the excitement of its narrative, *Barefoot Gen* addresses the importance of ethical agency under the impact of the bombing at the time and since.

### **The Moral Dimension of Japanese Aesthetics (Yuriko Saito)**

Aesthetics plays a significant role in humanity’s collective and cumulative project of world-making. Japanese aesthetics suggests important ways in which aesthetic experiences and activities help cultivate a moral sensibility both in the practitioners and in the appreciators, thereby contributing to improving the quality of life and the state of the world.

One of the dominant themes of Japanese aesthetics is respect for nature, whether as materials or as subject matters for artistic activities. Ranging from garden-making, flower arrangement, haiku composition, and painting to cooking and packaging, Japanese aesthetic sensibility is nurtured by working *with* the materials so as to bring out and articulate their native characteristics. Often expressed metaphorically,

such as “obeying the request of a rock” or “listening to a pine tree,” training of Japanese artists and aesthetic practitioners emphasizes minimizing their egos, developing the attitudes of humility and respect, and working in collaboration with the object. Aesthetic activities are thus first and foremost a form of self-discipline to cultivate the moral virtues of humility and respect.

In the Western environmental ethics discourse, in particular according to wilderness ethics, respect for nature often invokes the intrinsic value of nature or “good of its own,” and human manipulations of nature are generally characterized as destructive and abusive. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that, while leaving nature alone may sometimes be the most appropriate action, it is equally, if not more, important to develop strategies for how best to use nature. Today’s designers and architects concerned with sustainability derive inspirations for their practice from the same attitude exhorted in Japanese aesthetics: developing humility, reducing one’s ego, and listening to nature’s voice.

Respect for “the other” encouraged in Japanese aesthetics is not limited to natural objects and materials. It also regards other human beings: the recipients of aesthetic creations and activities. Most eloquently expressed in the art of tea ceremony, respect, care, consideration, and thoughtfulness toward other people constitute another prominent feature of Japanese aesthetic sensibility. Virtue ethics, which emerged recently in the Western philosophical tradition, sometimes does attend to the *manner* in which an action is carried out, which consists of aesthetic factors. However, such aesthetic dimensions of an action are often eclipsed by what gets accomplished by the action. Furthermore, it is not sufficiently recognized that virtues such as thoughtfulness and care toward other people can be expressed by the design and treatment of objects. Japanese aesthetic sensibility cultivates these virtues not only through practicing a certain manner of executing an action but also by creating and handling objects in a specific way. This moral education through aesthetic practices ranges from the bodily movements and the placement of implements involved in a tea ceremony to the way in which garden paths are designed, food is arranged on a plate, and a gift item is packaged. The specific features of these activities are guided by other-regarding considerations: how best to provide a pleasant, comfortable, easy, and/or rich and stimulating aesthetic experience in the guest, receiver, or user. This other-regarding mode of aesthetic considerations in acting, making, and arranging also underlies the practice of leading designers of Japan and elsewhere today, many of whom voice the importance of care and thoughtfulness in their design practice.

While Japanese aesthetics is dominated by concerns regarding the practitioners’ attitude, the aesthetic manifestation and cultivation of their moral virtues also helps promote the appreciators’ moral sensibility. By acknowledging and gratefully accepting the expression of thoughtfulness and care, the appreciators engage in a reciprocal moral training. They practice transcending their own horizon by experiencing things from the providers’ horizon, which would lead them to recognize and savor the aesthetic expression of care and thoughtfulness. Their gratefulness in turn gets aesthetically manifested in the manner of drinking the tea, walking on the garden path, eating the food, and opening the package. Failure to note and appreciate the thoughtfulness is likewise expressed in the manner of engaging in these actions, and is considered both an aesthetic and moral shortcoming. This reciprocal exchange and cultivation of moral virtues through aesthetic means provides one necessary ingredient of a good life and a good society. Care and thoughtfulness expressed through the kinds of

object created and arranged and the kinds of action executed in a certain manner define the nature of the environment that surrounds us. The character of our environment cannot but affect the quality of life and society. If surrounded with a thoughtful and humane environment responsive to our needs and wants and objects which are user-friendly in an egalitarian way, we are encouraged to pay it forward, as it were, motivated by our gratefulness that our experiences are taken seriously and attended to. On the other hand, if we are surrounded with an environment and objects which showcase the designers’ cleverness and branding without attention to our experiences, we tend to get demoralized, thinking that nobody is paying attention to our experiences. Such a reaction is not conducive to developing civic virtues or moral sensibility. The aesthetic dimension of our lives is thus not a frivolous triviality or decorativeness. It has an often unrecognized role to play in cultivating a moral sensibility, which in turn contributes to defining the quality of life and society. In this respect, Japanese culture shows one possible way in which aesthetics plays a role in humanity’s ongoing project of world-making.

### **Elegance in Japan (Barbara Sandrisser)**

On March 11, 2011, after the horrors of the earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent explosion of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant’s oldest reactor the following evening, I wondered if the Japanese would put aside forever notions of aesthetics and, more precisely, elegance. Those who managed to survive in and around the Fukushima area literally lost their environment. Their inner environment shattered as well as their surrounding environment. Their sense of place disappeared.

Donald Keene, University Professor Emeritus and Shincho Professor Emeritus of Japanese Literature at Columbia University, describes the essential qualities of Japanese aesthetics using four words: “suggestion,” “irregularity,” “simplicity,” and “perishability.” Using Kenkō Yoshida, a fourteenth-century Buddhist monk as his guide, Keene describes Kenkō’s ideas from his book *Tsurezuregusa (Essays in Idleness)*. Keene believes, as do others, that the Japanese sense of beauty is the core of all of Japanese culture. Throughout his long professional career as a teacher and writer, Keene emphasized the importance of the aesthetic aspects of Japanese creativity. He consistently reminded students that environment played a crucial role in everyday life and in creating beauty.

Exploring elegance as an aesthetic notion, both as we conceive it in the West and as the Japanese understand it, reveals fundamental yet intriguing truths for us to ponder. A unique aspect of beauty frequently misinterpreted, elegance is oftentimes criticized as a superficial, dispensable quality. Nevertheless, throughout history, elegantly designed objects and ideas formed an intimate relationship with each of us by extending our knowledge of the world, by enhancing our daily activities, and by heightening our aesthetic appreciation.

After the disaster in March, it was remarkable how quickly the notions of aesthetics and elegance reasserted themselves. Some in Japan compared the time to post-World War II, when poetry emerged almost immediately, appearing in newspapers throughout the country. Two other art forms reemerged: planting flowers and a variety of community street festivals. When people were allowed back into the restricted zones, many dug up blossoms from their gardens to plant in their new temporary space. Some sadly realized that these blossoms would be their only memory of their former homes. The spring cherry blossom festivals throughout the country also were a poignant reminder of life and death. Organized street festivals encouraged local participation featuring music, beautiful costumes, dancing, and parading along the main streets of small communities and cities. These continuing festivals seemed to

energize people of all ages, but they also had other important effects. They continued the human experience, providing value and meaning to artistic endeavors.

Beyond Keene and Kenkō, we can step back further into history. During the last decade of the tenth century in Japan, an accomplished, versatile lady-in-waiting, Sei Shonagon, wrote about elegance. She described six phenomena she believed to be truly elegant:

1. A white coat worn over a violet waistcoat.
2. Duck eggs.
3. Shaved ice mixed with liana syrup and put in a new silver bowl.
4. A rosary of rock crystal.
5. Wisteria blossoms. Plum blossoms covered with snow.
6. A pretty child eating small wild strawberries.

Today, Westerners and perhaps some Japanese would find it difficult to understand her interpretation of elegance. Our idea of what constitutes elegance most likely does not include any of Sei Shonagon's preferences. Yet, if we examine her selections carefully, we notice that they have certain attributes in common, and it is this kinship which provides us with a richer understanding of the elusive definition of elegance as perceived by the Japanese.

What strikes us immediately is that all the senses, even taste and sound, intermingle among her selections. Moreover, a kind of sixth sense emerges, a fusion of an intuitive response and an intellectual one which the Japanese call *kokoro*, literally mind/heart. We are also unable to dismiss the unassuming elegance apparent in natural phenomena. This paper will review her small inventory in order to discover the significance of her selections.

Today in Western society, the word "elegance" has fallen into disrepute. Elegance is now an affectation, in some ways similar to Roman times and the Renaissance. It is entangled with grandeur, embellishment, wealth, and physical appearance. We seem to have lost sight of the unique qualities inherent in the idea of elegance.

Many Western scholars appear reluctant to unify beauty and elegance overtly except in special situations, such as the "elegant proof" referred to by mathematicians and scientists. Thus, we must look at Japan where elegance is wedded to beauty linguistically and philosophically. One thousand years after Sei Shonagon, Kawabata Yasunari, in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, "Japan, the Beautiful and Myself," refers to the elegance of wisteria blossoms in much the same way as Sei Shonagon in *The Pillow Book* and Murasaki Shikibu in *The Tale of Genji*.

The Japanese spirit of elegance evokes a unique kind of aesthetic pride which developed from the Japanese's long tradition of appreciating the grace and dignity inherent in everyday life. Aesthetic pride should not be misconstrued as condescension or vanity. Genuine elegance exists in essentiality. Nothing can be eliminated without violating its meaning and thus everything essential remains and nothing unnecessary is added. Traditional Japanese perceived this essentiality in their environment. They esteemed elegant objects created by humans and elegance discovered in nature.

All cultures interpret themselves in many voices. Still, civilizations tend to echo the fundamental qualities of their cultural development through elegant ideas and creative endeavors. Traditional objects designed by the Japanese, such as folding fans, chopsticks, carpenter's tools, and movable walls, to name a few, exemplify the concept of elegance in a meaningful way. These deceptively simple things suggest that

elegance is not obvious. Occasionally, it may even conceal itself, encouraging us to discover its subtleties, for elegance respects the essence of things. Indeed, the continuing value of apprehending and understanding elegance is that it simultaneously intensifies and refines our sensibilities and thus our human experiences.

### Discussion Questions

The speakers presented their papers in alphabetical order by last name: **Peter Leech**, **Mara Miller**, **Yuriko Saito**, and **Barbara Sandrisser**. Each spoke for approximately 30 minutes. Ending at 4:30 p.m., the session closed with a spirited and cheerful 60-minute discussion in which all four speakers and virtually every member of the audience participated. The speakers appreciated the audience's thoughtful questions raised during the Q&A, which included the following:

1. Why is the aesthetics of the sense of smell a neglected topic in philosophy?
2. Does smell have any cognitive value? Why or why not?
3. Would you discuss the putative formlessness of fragrance?
4. How can we make representations of historic terror tolerable to children? Discuss some fruitful strategies.
5. Is it possible for works of art to function as cognitive prostheses—that is, as tools for extending cognition, emotion, social intelligence, and ethical awareness, and for teaching skills in these areas? If so, how?
6. Given that *The Sound of the Mountain* and *Barefoot Gen* return to classical Japanese aesthetics in order to deal with the horrors of the post-nuclear age, would you characterize both works as conservative in their outlook?
7. What is the relationship between the ethical notion of aesthetics as a Buddhist/Shintoist practice and the ethically problematic study of martial arts?
8. How does the apparently exclusionary character of Japanese aesthetic sensibility square with its Buddhist influences? Can Japanese Buddhists reconcile Buddhist teachings with traditional Japanese aesthetics?
9. Would you comment on the idea that frugality and simplicity serve as fertile soil for the education of aesthetics?
10. Chaotic behavior is observable in numerous natural systems such as the weather. How does this accord with the Japanese aesthetic appreciation of nature as a harmonious and orderly whole?
11. It is hypothesized that, for each of the six items which Sei Shonagon considered to be truly elegant, all the senses, even taste and sound, intermingle. Furthermore, a kind of sixth sense emerges, a fusion of an intuitive response and an intellectual response which the Japanese call *kokoro*, literally mind/heart. What physical system subserves this seemingly *sui generis* intuitive-cum-intellectual function?
12. Sei Shonagon's case for the elegance of a pretty child eating small wild strawberries is problematic, unless we consider fragrance, taste, touch, and sound as imagined. Comments?
13. The elegance of Sei Shonagon's choice examples is compared to the elegance of a surprisingly simple yet effective and constructive proof of a mathematical theorem. What relevant attributes if any does a

mathematical proof that achieves great results with a parsimony of means have in common with duck eggs, wisteria blossoms, and so forth?

14. It is claimed that the Japanese spirit of elegance evokes a *unique* kind of aesthetic pride which developed from the Japanese's long tradition of appreciating the grace and dignity inherent in everyday life. How is this claim of uniqueness to be established? I am dubious about such a claim, especially because of its potential for being used to discriminate others.
15. What is/are the particular quality/qualities within elegance that enable it to play a crucial and enduring role in Japanese life and culture?
16. The panel's presentation of papers in Japanese aesthetics stands in striking contrast to the standard Western work in aesthetics, especially in the English language. For Westerners tend to reduce aesthetics to a marginal area of specialized theorizing that has nothing to do with life. Yet Japanese culture shows us—doesn't it?—that aesthetic experience arises from life and contributes to a full and creative life that can be shared in community. Comments?

Hilary Putnam, John Searle, Jerome McGann, Charles Altieri, Tyrus Miller, and Charles Bernstein.

In the interview of philosopher Hilary Putnam, Aryal takes a strong stance against Putnam's claim for objective knowledge. Likewise, with philosophers Dan Breazeale and Allen Wood, the two staunch proponents of enlightenment rationality, Aryal counters their conception of rationality with the idea of "unreason" made by anti-Hegelian philosophers such as Vico, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. Additionally, with Kathleen M. Haney, he fruitfully raises the debate between modernity and postmodernity: Is postmodernity a radical break from modernity or simply a continuation? Under the topic of feminism, Aryal questions the relevancy of feminist discourse in the era of post-feminism. He is dissatisfied with the elitist feminist discourse by those so-called advocates of feminism who live in metropolitan centers and advocate female issues of poor women in the Third World. In his interview with critic Geoffrey Harpham, Aryal tries to enter into the heart of the western aesthetic debate. But Harpham cleverly avoids taking either side in the debate.

In some cases, Aryal seems to be completely lost in his claims with his interviewees. For instance, he is unable to press the question "Why is humanism obsolete today?" against critic Charles Altieri. Also, in his questions to Charles Bernstein, Aryal argues for modernist avant-gardism, but does not adequately question the cultural crisis that we can easily see in modernist art.

One of the remarkable aspects of Aryal's interview project is that it not only brought the attention of international scholarly communities to the Nepali commitment to scholarship, but also highlighted Nepali intellectual identity among them. The reception of the book was made among more than three thousand philosophers from more than eighty-two countries at the World Congress of Philosophy, July 30-August 31, 2008, in South Korea. It was also recognized by *The Philosophers' Magazine*, published by Routledge, and *The Exponent*, a newspaper in the U.S.

It took two full years for Aryal to finish this interview project while he was in Nepal before arriving in the U.S. in 2008. Guidance and assistance for this book were provided by Professor William McBride, the current president of the Federation of International Societies of Philosophy; Professor David Schrader, executive director of The American Philosophical Association; and former president of the Modern Language Association of America, Professor Marjorie Perloff.

Commenting on the book, an eminent literary theorist, Professor Jerome McGann, writes that the book "will open Western critical thinking of recent years to critical assessment by Asian intellectual communities." One of the leading American philosophers, Noam Chomsky, in a complimentary note to Aryal writes, "A very promising start."

*The Humanities at Work: International Exchange of Ideas in Aesthetics, Philosophy, and Literature* was published by Sunlight Publication in Kathmandu, Nepal, in 2008, and a digital version is forthcoming from the Philosophy Documentation Center. It has been digitized by the University of Pennsylvania library and is available at <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pepc/contents.html>. The book is also included in the database of the Modern Language Association (MLA) of America.

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## BOOK REVIEW

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### ***The Humanities at Work: International Exchange of Ideas in Aesthetics, Philosophy, and Literature***

Yubraj Aryal (Kathmandu: Sunlight Publication, 2008).

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*The Humanities at Work: International Exchange of Ideas in Aesthetics, Philosophy, and Literature* (2008) is a collection of scholarly interviews, prepared by a Nepali scholar, Yubraj Aryal, under the theme of international exchange of ideas in the humanities for mutual understanding and global peace. This work collects thirty interviews of American philosophers, literary theorists, and specialists in aesthetics. It covers a broad range of areas from the disciplines of philosophy, aesthetics, and literature: Platonism, neo-Platonism, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, modernism, avant-gardism, postmodernism, deconstruction, feminism, postcolonialism, and more.

The book is divided into three historicized sections presented in a reverse chronological order: Twentieth Century, Renaissance to Enlightenment, and Pre-Socratic to Renaissance. Each section is further divided into two thematic blocks: one philosophy and the other poetics, art, and aesthetics. Throughout the book, Aryal not only interviews but debates experts in their respective fields concerning some of the major controversies of aesthetics, philosophy, and literature today. He, at times, brings strong opposition to the viewpoints of his interviewees, most of whom are eminent U.S. scholars like