

ART OF DYNAMIC SYMMETRY: IKEBANA, JAPANESE TRADITIONAL FLOWER ARRANGEMENT

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Abstract: Ikebana, Flower Arrangement, is one of the traditional, highly appreciated arts of Japan. While Western style flower arranging has retained its symmetrical shape all this while, Ikebana acquired the new form which could be described as dissymmetry or dynamic symmetry. We would like to compare these two styles of flower arrangement and we hope to clarify the philosophy and spirit that supports these art forms. We will talk about the history and cultural background of Ikebana, its materials, and the spirit and the religions that mould the dissymmetry. We consider the non-symmetric style of Ikebana as the result of the peculiar commingled religious environment of Shinto and Buddhism found in Japan.

1 SYMMETRY AND DISSYMMETRY IN FLOWER ARRANGEMENT

Probably the most striking differences between Ikebana and Western style flower arrangement is in their shape. While Ikebana is thoroughly dissymmetric, Western flower arrangement stresses symmetry. As the religious element in flower offering and decoration has been of major historical importance, a discussion of the religious background of these two forms of flower arrangement will bear some fruit.

The dissymmetric style of Ikebana is partially the result of the peculiar commingled religious environment of Shinto and Buddhism found in Japan. Shintoism, the indigenous pantheism that predates Buddhism, views nature as the dwelling place of the deities, with no one of them revered as dominant. There are vast arrays of deities, *yaoyorozu* or over eight million, but no definite leader. The traditional Japanese mythology offers us a useful means to enter into the world of pre-historical Shinto thought. The key creation myths, those concerned with the creation of Japan, of humanity and of agriculture, involve complementary forces, but no central force or figure. The rather fluid sense of cosmic order can be interpreted as a dynamic symmetric structure with an empty centre. Ikebana is averse to a simple balanced form around a central point. Rather within the apparent dissymmetry of Ikebana, a dynamic connectiveness is sought between the various elements around an empty core.

Doctrines found in Shinto and Buddhist stress the importance of living in harmony with nature, and it is in this unity of human and nature that the art of Ikebana is grounded. Just as nature, according to Shinto principles, is not comprehended as being either symmetrical or having a fundamental geometrical order, Ikebana reproduces this dissymmetry by using three main flower stems. The longest thickest stem symbolises 'heaven', the next longest 'earth', while the shortest represents the human dimension. No stem is placed vertically. Rather with subordinate stems and flowers, the three main stems in accord create a condensed cosmos. The beauty of Ikebana stands on this idea of the harmonious universe, where human, earth and heaven are in balance. Thus we have dynamic symmetry.

In contrast, symmetrical Western style flower arrangement developed in the religious environment of Christianity. A faith based on a unique, central figure, God, tends to a certain symmetrical interpretation of the world. Western flower arrangement has not lost this ideal during its development and even as an art form today attempts to model itself on the created order.

2 MATERIALS

As the final shape of a flower arrangement is necessarily closely connected with the materials from which it is made, it is important to consider the materials used. One of the characteristics of Ikebana is the use of branches and twigs, in addition to flowers. Trees are paradoxically symbolic of both age and death, as well as of evergreen life. In the eyes of our distant ancestors, trees must have appeared to die in winter and then to revive in spring with new shoots and flowers. Thus a tree represents not only life, but also age and mortality.

The great symbolic wealth attached to trees and so to their twigs and branches, is certainly a key reason for their use in Ikebana and its attempt to represent the condensed cosmos. In Western flower arrangement, flowers in bud or in full bloom are the key components and so the youth, love, life and beauty that they symbolise become the theme of the total arrangement.

3 CYCLE OF LIFE AND DEATH

The composite Japanese religious context and the aesthetic sense that this has given birth to, have moulded Ikebana during its development. Certainly the Buddhist concept of the cycle of life, leading from life through death to life again repeatedly, influenced the introduction of 'dead' branches into Ikebana. The tree is symbolic of both life and death and the cycle leading from one to the other. Ikebana attempts to give artistic expression to this fundamental Buddhist concept. The art of Ikebana is to recreate a micro-cosmos, where all of nature coexists in harmony. This unity requires the use of part of a tree to symbolise the cycle of life and death, an essential element in the Buddhist cosmos.

Life is emphasised and celebrated in Western style flower displays. In this created order, life and death are not part of a cycle, but form part of a lineal progression that leads us beyond this world. Death does not lead us back to this world, so death does not become the complementary counterpart of life in the great cycle as perceived in Buddhism. Flowers in full bloom signify the full life that God has granted to all creatures, and the praise that the creator is due from creation.

4 CONCLUSION

In this rather impressionistic approach to the question of symmetry and dissymmetry in Ikebana and Western flower arrangement, we have emphasised the contrast between them to highlight their respective religious backgrounds. Even though Western flower arranging is hardly deemed an art, it physically presents certain theological currents of its religious environment. As the creature models itself on its creator, so symmetrical order and fullness of life are key elements in a floral offering. The beauty of the flowers enhanced by their symmetrical display reflects the spirit of life within each person and the praise they offer to God for this gift

Ikebana, as discussed earlier, is a concentrated presentation of the cosmos, but in quite a different way it can also be considered a concentrated presentation of the Japanese aesthetic sense. There is a religious component to this, and the influence of theological concepts is apparent in the development of Ikebana. The non-symmetrical, yet harmonious world of Shintoism, the cycle of life and death of Buddhism and, the unique commingling of these religions, are made visible in this floral art. A dynamic symmetry generated through the interaction of Shintoism and Buddhism and continually refined by Japanese distinctiveness.

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