

# The Profits of A Long Experience with Beauty

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Beauty, in its many forms, has preoccupied the Japanese people to a degree unmatched in history. So it is only reasonable that they should have arrived at a deeper grasp and penetration of what comprises beauty than has been achieved by other cultures that cared less.

You might say they acquired experience in judging beauty. They must have passed through those stages of poor judgment which we associate with *nouveau riche*: the falling for the shallow, the showy, the laboriously contrived, the tricky. Their mistakes, if there were any, are lost in the shadow of time. Their artifacts preserved in museums, temples, and shrines show that as far back as 522 A.D. their judgment about beauty had already been deeply cultivated.

Such books as *The Tale of Genji* and *The Pillow Book* reveal a "rampant aestheticism" as far back as the Heian Period (794-1392). At that time the upper classes were conversing in poetry. Beauty of penmanship was a cult. Everything, from music to manners to food to dress, was expected to be beautiful. Even religious ceremonies were viewed chiefly from an aesthetic point of view. Anybody who wanted to be somebody was expected to be able to play at least one musical instrument.

So it is not surprising that an exacting standard of connoisseurship has prevailed for at least ten centuries. Nor is it surprising that there developed a set of values and value-words by which to analyze the various grades and facets of beauty.

This system for the analyzing and grading of beauty seems, from HOUSE BEAUTIFUL'S point of view, the most valuable lesson to be learned from Japan. For our Western world is quite loose and vague when it comes to describing beauty. Our approach to the subject is through a semantic fog; we are for it, but we can't describe exactly what it is. We haven't hammered out a set of specifications for how to arrive at it, nor can we be very precise about gradations between good, better, and best.

If we can look at beauty as they look at it, we can enlarge our own understanding enormously. Fortunately, it is easy to comprehend— or how could a whole nation have been made into art lovers?

The key word for us to learn to is *shibui*, an adjective that denotes the ultimate in beauty. (*Shibusa* is the noun for this concept.)

Neither word translates quickly or satisfactorily, so it is easier to take over the Japanese words and make them our own. (We have done this with many other foreign words, such as chic, garage, so why not again?)

Let us analyze the content of *shibusa* and *shibui*. It can be done by quoting Dr. Soetsu Yanagi, Director of the Museum of Folk Crafts in Tokyo, writing in a magazine called "Kokoro."

*"Its first element is simplicity. To put it another way, complex things are alien to shibusa. This first quality can also be described by the word 'austerity.' The tea ceremony devotees also called this the 'austere quality' and if we were to cite some simple, similar example, we might mention 'unadorned,' 'plain,' 'unfigured.' As everyone knows, the early masterpieces of tea utensils were simple and unadorned. Even articles which had family crests on them retained the inherent element of simplicity. Therefore, over-decorated things did not become shibui tea things, and were not sought after by people. The English word 'plain' is always submerged within shibusa.*

*"The second element can be called 'implicitness.' Simply put, it is the quality of inward-inclusiveness, of pregnant-with-meaning, or of intrinsic meaningfulness. In other words, it is the quality of stress on inner meaning, so that it can also be called 'depth,' and things which lack this depth do not achieve true shibusa. In other words, superficial things are alien to shibusa. To borrow Lao Tse's words, we might call this 'beauty of blackness,' or of subtlety and profundity (the reality of the space contained within a tea cup).*

“As for the aspect of rich-with-inner-meaning, the Buddhists might express it as ‘unmade,’ or ‘unborn,’ and this is a quality inherent in *shibusu*, one may say. The Zen priests frequently asked questions like: ‘What is the lotus blossom before it emerges from the water?’ or ‘What is an old mirror before it is shined?’ No matter what your concept of beauty may be, the meaning is profound. In Japanese brush painting, a great deal of blank space is frequently left by the artist—this can also be called an expression of the search for meaningfulness. Also, when people are greatly impressed by the reverberation of an oriental bell, we can say that their spirits are enticed by the world of limitless, endless meaningfulness. The excess space in a painting and the after-reverberation of the bell are the meaningfulness. At any rate, if this quality is lacking, it falls into the category of the superficial and the shallow, and therefore is remote from *shibusu*. So, this ‘implicitness’ is an important element of *shibusu*.

“*The third quality is modesty or humility.*” It can be considered the practice of desisting from constant self-assertion or the habit of not leaving traces of oneself. In the Zen phrase, ‘one does not impress his own personality on his craftsmanship,’ and here one can see the hallmark of *shibusu*. This quality of modesty, logically, does not flaunt beauty on the outside, therefore it has close connection with previously mentioned ‘implicitness.’ This is the quality of silence about oneself and therefore the following:

“*Fourth quality—silence*—is also involved. Or, perhaps ‘tranquility’ is more suitable. The tea ceremony experts always contained the idea of silence. Loudness stopped, and quiet existed. Loudness and *shibusu* are irreconcilable. Therefore, tranquility is one of the basic qualities of *shibusu*. Here the oriental character becomes more and more rich; the ultimate tranquility, the purport of the Buddhist concept of Nirvana, is suggested. This is perhaps the most profound hallmark of *shibusu*. To put it simply, it is long-term serenity, quiet, and tranquility. Poets often sing of the state of loneliness and of autumn evenings, and this sort of quality is also seen in *shibusu*. When tea ceremony devotees speak of plants dying in the cold, they are not speaking floridly— but are actually mourning the tranquility destroyed by various involvements of the spirit (with material things). *Shibusu* embodies the spirit which tells of the approach of the end of various inner conflicts. In English, ‘silence,’ or perhaps ‘composure,’ ‘sobriety,’ or ‘calmness’ describe this aspect.

“*The fifth quality is naturalness, or inevitability.* To put it simply, it connotes a lack of artifice—a spontaneity. True *shibusu* never arises by design or intention. If intention or design is exposed, we lose serenity thereby, we tend toward loudness, and depart from *shibusu*. A *shibui* object, in this light, is born, not made. There is a famous saying by the tea ceremony experts that: ‘to become rusty is all right, to make something rusty is no good.’ The Zen Priest Rinzai said: ‘Do not respect the making of things.’ And in *shibusu* can be seen the purport of uneventfulness, of the loss of tranquility which comes with the making of things.

“If one thinks thus, it is logical to make *uneventfulness, or normalcy, the sixth quality.* This quality leads *shibusu* to spontaneity and to health. *Shibusu* is far removed from sickness and abnormality; rather it is deeply involved with normality. Therefore, *shibusu* has intimate contact with the usual, the commonplace. Perhaps because of this, *shibusu* is seen a great deal in folk craft. If one looks at the tea utensils chosen by the tea-ceremony men of old, many were of folk-craft origin, commonly-used utensils. This fact should be given due notice. The *ido*, a type of bowl much favored by the tea-ceremony people, is a good example of this. To put it another way, it is difficult to preserve *shibusu* in the luxurious equipment of the aristocracy. The formation of a natural relationship between simplicity, the first quality of *shibusu* mentioned above, and folk craft, can be understood here as a logical result.

“*The seventh quality, flowing automatically from naturalness, is coarseness, or roughness,* and it can be said that it frequently appears in *shibusu*. Natural objects, not being man-made, keep the human being in the background, and nature appears on the surface; in this the form of *shibusu* is often seen.

A type of pottery beloved by the tea-ceremony men appeared without glaze in its natural state, and this can be called a most spectacular form of *shibusu*. This is because the finish was

occasionally a gaudy covering, and so removing it and leaving the pottery in the natural state was a logical way to display *shibusu*.

“This is not seen much in the West, but when the Japanese, who are devoted to the tea ceremony, see porcelain, they look immediately at the bottom because there they can see a place which has not been glazed. There they can see most clearly and feel most simply and plainly the strength of what we call *shibusu*. One can say that the tea-ceremony experts revered the *ido* type of bowl, which was deliberately marked by a rough natural streak, just because of this.

“In today’s language, one can even call this roughness an imperfection, and this imperfection as inherent in *shibusu*. The cracks and distortions which frequently appeared in tea utensils were nothing but imperfections. I call these ‘beauty in irregularity.’ and it frequently appears in *shibusu*.

“I think that, in general, what is called a *shibui* color is a shaded one. It always has a darkling serenity, and one can also explain that it is not completely pure. For example, if the refined chemical, cobalt, is compared with natural cobalt, the latter is *shibui*. The former is gaudy—its color is too pure, while the latter contains impurities in color. This impurity is distortion in color and is an irregularity. This adds *shibusu* to color. Or, the refined cobalt has had its impurity too well controlled, while the natural product can be considered untouched. So, by this token, freedom is always present in *shibusu*. And freedom spontaneously invites irregularity.

“If beauty does not exist without freedom, may we not say that there is in *shibusu*, which includes irregularity, the basic quality of beauty, that is, the beauty of freedom? Whatever kind of person seeks beauty, the fact that he will sooner or later return to the beauty of *shibusu* shows that the quality of the most basic beauty is inherent in *shibusu*.

“We have listed the various qualities and, if we take another glance at them, perhaps we can accept them as extremely negative. They are either plain, silent, tranquil; passive qualities adhere to *shibusu*. The concept of Nothingness and Emptiness are not only nothing and all-renouncing—rather they are concepts of all-inclusive nothingness, and nothingness is equivalent to being. Even silence can be described as ‘a silence like a thunder-bolt.’ The Oriental concept of silence acting as the opposite of silence is a profound one, so one may say that in *shibusu* there are qualities difficult to describe. Therefore, by thinking of opposite meanings, as follows, undoubtedly we may clarify the meaning of *shibusu*, but actually it might be better to accept it as a word with elements not possessing true antonyms.

“*Shibusu* has always been an exquisiteness difficult to express. However, since human common sense can always understand by means of contrasting conceptions, we can at least try to give some antonyms. In general, the opposites of *shibusu* are:

1. Showy or gaudy—although the direct opposite of showy or gaudy would be sober, or plain, certainly a vivacious kind of showiness can be considered the opposite of *shibusu*.
2. Next comes loudness. As long as sobriety and tranquility are important elements of *shibusu*, loudness can be considered an opposite. Things heavily ornamented, for example, destroy *shibusu*. The fact that, among the masterpieces of tea utensils, not a single one is dominated by ornamentation, is evidence of this.
3. Sumptuousness. This is the opposite of simplicity and tranquility, so it stands opposed to *shibusu*. In the same way, aristocratic pomp is, naturally, remoter from the concept of *shibusu*. It is well to note that masterpieces of tea utensils, which can be called the Embodiment of *shibusu*, are never chosen from the sumptuous ones.
4. Vulgarity or commonplaceness, which is close in meaning to shallowness, is the opposite of *shibusu*, which contains the elements of calm and depth. Superficial or shallow things are always negations of *shibusu*.

“Now, while it is not definitely known just when the word *shibusa* came into general use in Japan, its use spread with the popularization of the tea ceremony, so that it can be said that it became widely used by the end of the 17th Century. What kind of influence has it had on the life of the people?

“*Shibusa* guaranteed to the life of the people a high aesthetic level. Under this standard, people refined their artistic sentiments. And, as the standard spread, the whole nation began to maintain the standard. In this development the role of the tea ceremony devotee must be highly valued. Fortunately, this standard, *shibui*, was directly communicated by means of the actual tea things. If one looks back, it is clear that there have been various flaws in the tea utensils, but in general these tea things have retained the beauty of *shibusa*. Therefore, if there had been no tea ceremony, and the tea utensils had not been treasured, people might very soon have forgotten the value of *shibusa*. However, fortunately, tea things repeatedly demonstrated to us the beauty of *shibusa*. One may say that this gave the proper direction to the aesthetic training of the Japanese.”