Original Paper *Forma*, **16**, 273–278, 2001

Art of Dynamic Symmetry: Ikebana, Japanese Traditional Flower Arrangement

Marie MORIYAMA* and Megumi MORIYAMA

**Department of French Literature, Graduate School of Keio University, Mita, Minato-ku, Tokyo 108-8345, Japan*

(Received September 17, 2001; Accepted October 22, 2001)

Keywords: Dynamic Symmetry, Dissymmetry, Empty Center, Shintoism, Japanese Mythology

Abstract. IKEBANA, Flower Arrangement, is one of the highly appreciated, traditional arts of Japan. While Western-style flower arranging has retained its symmetrical shape, Ikebana acquired a new form that can be characterized by dissymmetry or dynamic symmetry. These two styles of flower arrangements are compared to clarify the philosophy and spirit that contributed to these art forms. In addition, the history and cultural background of Ikebana, its materials, the spirit and the religions that mould the dissymmetry are discussed. The non-symmetric style of Ikebana is considered to be the result of the peculiar commingled religious environment of Shinto and Buddhism found in Japan.

1. Introduction

In response to the opportunity to participate in ISIS-Symmetry in Sydney, we have revised and expanded our original paper presented at Tsukuba University (MORIYAMA and MORIYAMA, 1999). Its main purport was the contrast between Ikebana and Western flower arrangement, and an inquiry into the grounds for this difference. We consider that a key factor for this is the varying religious background of these styles of flower arranging. Whereas the compound religious environment of Shintoism and Buddhism helped to mould Ikebana, Christianity seems to sustain Western style flower arranging.

In this paper, which is the result of further study, we have incorporated our new views on this topic, especially in regard to the role of Shintoism. It is worthwhile to examine the structure of Japanese mythology, which is basic to Shintoism, and to consider its connection with the shape, or Katachi of Ikebana. In this manner we believe that new insights into the issue of symmetry and Ikebana are achieved.

As for the question of terminology, we prefer to use “dissymmetry” and “dynamic symmetry” in place of “asymmetry”. Nagy defines dissymmetry as “a small distortion of symmetry, the lack of some elements of symmetry” (NAGY, 1996). While dynamic symmetry can be interpreted in similar terms, the major distinction is the indication of motion.

2. The Historical Progress of Dissymmetric Ikebana through Symmetric Ikebana

The origin of Ikebana, Japanese flower arrangement, dates from around the seventh century with the arrival of Buddhism in Japan. Among the various religious practices that were adopted at that time was the custom of offering flowers to the Buddha. However it was only in the fifteenth century that Ikebana became a distinctive art form, independent of Buddhism. In studying this development, the role of symmetry is significant.

In traditional Ikebana, as practiced since the seventh century, the main flower stem was set vertically in the center of the vase, with two additional stems placed symmetrically to the left and right. This style called RIKKA (standing flowers) is still practised in Buddhist temples today. In the fifteenth century, in what may be considered the result of Japanese aesthetic sense responding to formal Buddhist traditions, a new dissymmetric style of Ikebana appeared. By the end of the eighteenth century, this style became more sophisticated with diverse placement angles and the varying lengths of branches. The dissymmetry of the new art form differentiated it decisively from earlier forms of flower arrangement. Independent of the religious context of offering flowers, Ikebana had gained its position as a distinct Japanese art.

3. Dissymmetry and Dynamic Symmetry in Ikebana

While Western flower arrangement stresses symmetry, Ikebana is thoroughly dissymmetric. As the religious element in flower offering and decoration has been of major importance, a discussion of the religious background of Ikebana will bear some fruit.

As mentioned in the introduction, we consider the dissymmetric style of Ikebana as partially the result of the peculiar commingled religious environment of Shinto and Buddhism found in Japan. Prior to a discussion on the influence of Buddhism, Shintoism offers some significant insights into the shaping of Ikebana.

Shinto, the indigenous Japanese religious tradition that predates Buddhism, views nature as the dwelling place of the KAMI, the deities of Japan. Though the number of these KAMI is said to be *yaoyorozu* (over eight million), which is to be interpreted as meaning a countless number, no one of them is considered as dominant. Unlike the absolute, almighty God of Christianity or even the central lordship role of Zeus, one god among many, Shinto has a vast array of KAMI with no definitive leader. This rather fluid and dynamic sense of cosmic order is partly responsible for the aversion to symmetry in Ikebana.

This aversion to symmetry may be observed more clearly when we look into the structure of Japanese mythology, which is a key basis for Shitoism. One of the distinguishing traits is its structural element. It is notable that at every momentous point of the mythology, such as the creation of heaven and earth, three gods appear repeatedly as can be observed in Table 1. At the Creation of Heaven and Earth, three Gods, Takamimusuhi, Amenominakanushi, Kamimusuhi were born. When there was interaction between Heaven and the Land of the Dead, new gods, Amaterasu, Tsukuyomi, and Susanoo came into being. When Heaven came into contact with the Earth, further gods, Hoderi, Hosuseri, and Hoori came into the world. These triads of gods form a symmetrical relationship at first

Table 1. Japanese mythology: examples of structure with an empty center, from KAWAI (1999).

KOJIKI Myth	Central God (idle, inactive)		
First Triad of Gods Creation of Heaven and Earth	TAKAMIMUSUHI (paternal)	AMENOMINA NUSHI	KAKAMIMUSUHI (maternal)
Second Triad of Gods Contact between Heaven and Land of the Dead	AMATERASU (heaven)	TSUKUYOMI	SUSANOO (earth)
Third Triad of Gods Contact between God of Heaven and God of Earth	HODERI (sea)	HOSUSERI	HOORI (mountain)

impression, with one in the middle and two on opposite sides. For example, Amenominakanushi seems to be dominant at the center, while the paternal figure of Takamimusuhi and the maternal figure of Kamimusuhi take up their positions symmetrically. Amaterasu and Susanoo seem to station themselves on either side with Tsukuyomi in the middle. However, strangely enough, the central god like Amenominakanushi who is supposed to be dominant virtually does nothing. These central gods are named and deemed to be important, but are inactive and hardly take part in the story, while the two gods in symmetric interaction play the active parts. For example, Amaterasu has special sovereignty ruling over the sun, and Susanoo is the hero who appears most often in the myths of the KOJIKI collection (record of old stories). Still, these two gods are not binary oppositions, but relative figures. Neither of them is absolute, with their roles and authority alternating with the other. The resulting triadic structure is characterised by a dynamic relationship around a hollow center.

A Japanese psychologist KAWAI (1999) described this archetype of Japanese mythology as “a structure with an empty center”. Of the three gods, one central god is practically idle or empty, and the other two keep a non-static, shifting balance around it. Their mobility contrasts with the passivity of the core. These triads can be interpreted as representing a dynamic symmetry with an empty center.

BARTHES (1982), a French structuralist develops a similar interpretation of Tokyo in his book “Empire of Signs”. He states that around the Emperor’s palace, the energetic daily activity of the political, economic and cultural capital of a major nation revolves. Yet, this palace is forbidden, unseen, and hidden behind foliage and protected by moats. “(Tokyo) does possess a center, but this center is empty”. This center is “no more than an evaporated notion, subsisting here, not in order to irradiate power, but to give to the entire urban movement the support of its central emptiness.” This passage echoes the Japanese disposition for dynamic symmetry with an empty center (Fig. 1).

The structural elements of mythology certainly influenced the shape of Ikebana. The lack of an established cosmic hierarchy mitigates against a simple balanced arrangement around a central point. While the fairly fluid sense of cosmic order apparent in the triad mythologies highlights a non-static relationship, which can be interpreted as a dynamic

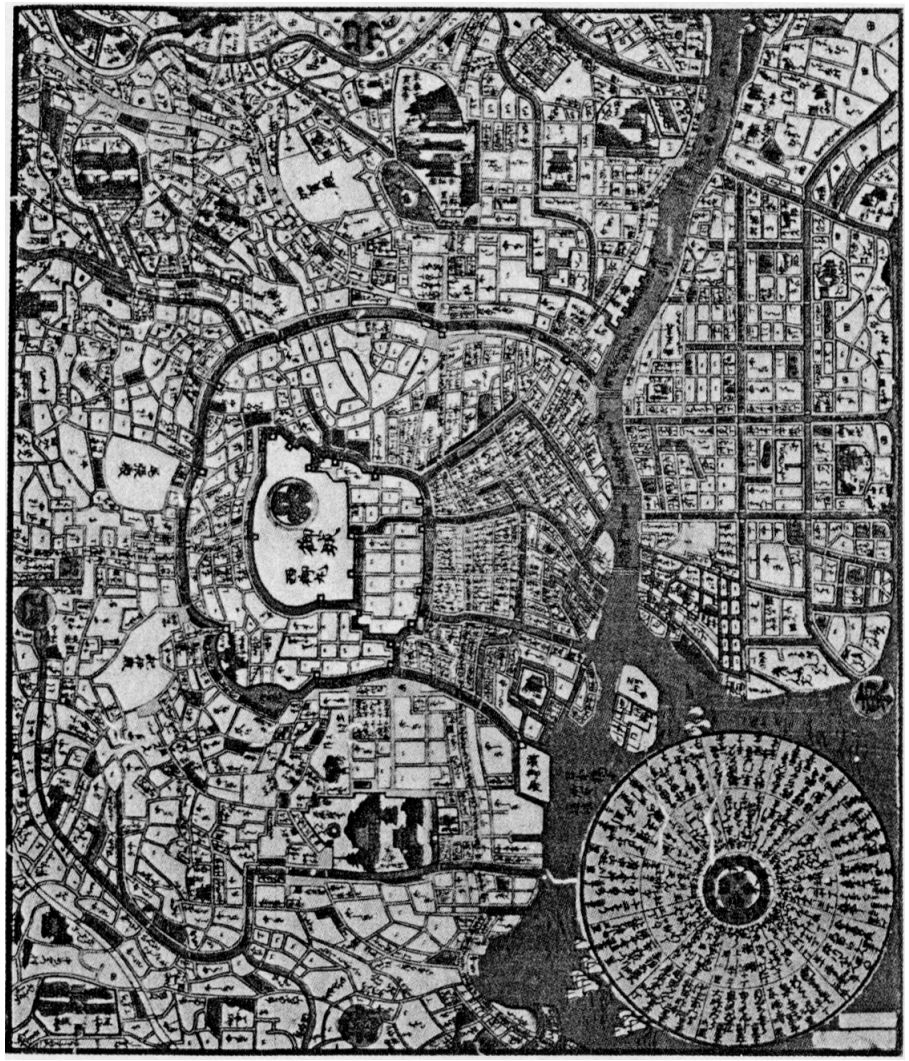

Fig. 1. A map of Edo (Tokyo): center-city, empty center, from *Hyocho no teikoku* (*Empire of Signs*) of BARTHES (1996).

symmetric structure with an empty center. Within the 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 balanced or having a fundamental geometrical order, Ikebana reproduces this dynamic symmetry by using three main flower stems. The longest thickest stem symbolizes ‘heaven’, the next

longest 'earth', while the shortest represents the 'human' dimension. No stem is placed vertically. None of them is dominant. Rather with subordinate stems and flowers, the three main stems in union create a condensed cosmos. The dynamic shape of Ikebana stands on this idea of the harmonious universe, where human, earth and heaven are in accord.

As has been pointed out, Ikebana has evolved from the dissymmetric style into that of dynamic symmetry through its connection with Shintoism and Buddism. Even though Shintoism is polytheistic, no central god is dominant as Zeus is in Greek mythology. Also, by contemplating the structure of Japanese mythology, we have found the peculiar triadic structure with two gods connected dynamically and a central figure inactive. This framework can be depicted as dynamic symmetry with an empty center. The original RIKKA form of Ikebana based on symmetry and a central structure, through the influence of the Japanese religious environment slowly developed into the dissymmetric structure of today with no absolute center.

4. Materials*

As the final shape of a flower arrangement is necessarily connected closely with the materials from which it is made, because 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.

5. 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 symbolize the cycle of life and death, an essential element in the Buddhist cosmos.

Life is emphasized 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 linear progression that leads us beyond this world. Death does not lead us back to this world, so death does not become

*Since the undermentioned chapters overlap with those of the original paper, the gist of them is given as follows. For the complete version, please see: "A Comparison between Asymmetric Japanese Ikebana and Symmetric Western Flower Arrangement" (MORIYAMA and MORIYAMA, 1999).

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.

6. Conclusion

In this approach to the question of symmetry and dissymmetry in Ikebana and Western flower arrangement, we have emphasized 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 it can also be considered in quite a different way as 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 is generated through the interaction of Shintoism and Buddhism and continually refined by Japanese distinctiveness.

We are deeply grateful to His Imperial Highness Prince Mikasa Takahito, whose kind interest and encouragement first engendered our interest in symmetry. Also we would like to express our heartfelt thanks to Mr. Leo Schumacher for his encouragement and warm support.

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