



Art is  
Expression



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# Art is Expression of Life—The Truth of Art

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Why do human beings express? What is art for human beings? This treatise treats an essence of my philosophical thought of art which tries to grasp the essence of art in the expression of life. This treatise will clarify the essence of art by treating the view of the universe and the view of the life which seem to form the basis of art. To depict the spring in a flower, which is just art.

## 1 Abstraction and Symbol

### **Expression of Things Themselves**

Cezanne's "Still Life with a Plate of Apples" of 1890-94 is a simple still life depicting several apples on a plate and a coffee cup placed on a table in a room, ignoring traditional perspective. However, looking at it closely, it is noticed that it has a complicated composition. For example, the rear part of the table is pushed upwards, and the coffee saucer is also distorted somewhat, and further the rear part of the plate with apples is also pushed forward. The colors of table, apples and coffee cup are intense, and they establish the existence of apples firmly. This unique work belonging to Cezanne's mature period expresses not only the rigid solidity of things but also the silence of room surrounding them completely. In general, Cezanne's still life is based on his own eyes trying to grasp the essence of things by

looking at them straightly and approaching them directly, which gives a highly existential atmosphere to the depicted objects.



Cezanne "Still Life with a Plate of Apples"

Such Cezanne's way to approach "things themselves" has already far surpassed Impressionists at that time. Because Impressionists attempted to express things following light which has no contour and its impression, they denied the existence of line, decomposed shape to the utmost limit and finally dissolved even color itself. As the result, the existence of things has regressed in the paintings by Impressionists, and the weight the things ought to have had inherently has also been lost. The existence of things, on the contrary, became what might appear for the first time after the reconstruction in our subjective side. It is true that Cezanne associated with Impressionist painters and was influenced by them in his youth, but Cezanne desiring to approach things themselves directly, couldn't tolerate such Impressionists' indirect and atomistic expressive way of things. For Cezanne, Impressionists' way of decomposing color-tone on the canvas and integrating it on the retina, was to be overcome at any cost.

In order to grasp things themselves directly, Cezanne first

divided the planes of things into a number of small facets, and then gave each facet the color to bear, and, on the base of the relationship between the color and the other colors, and the tension relationship between the colors and the lines, tried to recover the shapes of things themselves which had been decomposed by Impressionists, directly. By doing so, Cezanne tried to revive the shapes of things and to grasp the essences of them. In Cezanne's painting, colors, shapes and lines revive the whole of existence, competing each other. Still life is a representative example showing Cezanne's constructing principle. It is because of Cezanne's such expressive method that the fruits, the glass cups and the jugs painted there by him, could come closer to our eyes as if they had their own lives.

As in case of Cézanne's work, if art should express the essence of things themselves essentially, art cannot be mere expression of emotion. Art work is not necessarily for the representation of personal emotions such as joy, sadness, excitement or suffering, nor is it for the conveyance of such personal feelings to the others. Whether painting or music, they are not necessarily the expression of artist's own imagination or inside. Also, they are not even the empathy to the objects. In short, art is not the expression of the subject.

Art is rather the expression of the truth of things, and it must be the recognition of it. Therefore, such art that the truth beyond subjectivity appeared in its expression itself, should be called the great art. So, in order for art to become art truly, the self which is feeling inside must be overcome. If art is thought to

be the expression of ego, and further, if the great artwork is considered to be such art as expresses it best, the art will have fallen into mere narcissism. There is no catharsis in the art having fallen into narcissism, and, even if there are, it will be of low grade. If we think that art is derived from the soul of the artist and try to explain it exclusively as the expression of the inner world of artist, such art will degenerate into a mere self-expression.

It is relatively new, in the modern age that art began to be thought as the externalization of the inside. Modern subjectivity aesthetics seeking the basic principle of art in the powers of the mind, combined the judging criteria of beauty with the subjective emotion and taste. Such thought started from Kant. In his "Criticism of Judgment", Kant thought that whether natural beauty or artistic beauty, beauty represents the sensitive idea, and he grasped art work as the object of sensitive perception. From that point, he tried to solve the problems about the essence of art. Thus, Kant thought that art is formed by the subjective and sensitive activity being connected with the objects and materials, and concluded that it was the sensitive subject that makes judgments and compositions of the aesthetic things. And, for that reason, above all, he gave the highest importance to the imagination, namely the power to integrate, which works in artistic activities such as creating, contemplating and so on.<sup>1</sup>

However, Kant's aesthetic theory assumes the dualism of thing and mind. For the reason, it concluded that the art grasps

its object by the mind and the pleasant feeling of the subject judges its beauty. However, the aesthetic theory that looks for the basis of beauty exclusively in the subjectivity of the activity of our mind, has the reason to be overcome. Art is not necessarily the expression of I who feel. Expression of the truth that is neither subjective nor objective, should be just the art. Artists are trying to express this truth. Cezanne's still life proves this better than anything.

### **Abstraction**

If art is the expression of the essence of things and the truth of things, artists must paint from objects thoroughly. Indeed, whether the eastern or the western, the painters have observed nature patiently and have gazed at things thoroughly in order to paint from them. However, painting from nature is neither simply copying it, nor imitating it, nor even duplicating it. To paint from nature must be to grasp the truth of things as well as the life of things just by concentrating on looking at them.

To paint from nature is to have an insight into the life of things. The painter gazes at the flower from every direction, and acquires the essence of the flower and its life. The flower painting which succeeded in painting from it is vivid. It is because the artist grasped the flower's life at that time. Cezanne also tried to catch the life of commonplace apple, desk and jug directly. Even if realism or realistic expression, they must be the depiction of such life.

To paint from nature or to paint realistically is to reproduce it, to represent it, and to make it appear itself. By reproducing, the essence of things appears before your eyes. The expression and recognition of truth by representation is just art. Because the work of selecting the material and extracting the essence is naturally included in this process, the reproduced work is not as it was given before. Skillful depiction that is true to life, means the depiction where the depicted things are extracted in their essence.

Indeed, no matter how representational the painting is, it does not depict what is as it is. On the contrary, superficial imitation cannot grasp the object's true life. Abstraction is necessary to grasp the object's life. In general, there is no art without abstraction. About painting, it is often referred to as either representational or abstract, but the difference between them is only a matter of degree. Even if the painting is representational, abstraction is there. Every painting, whether very representative or highly abstractive, is trying to express the life of object in abstracted lines, planes, colors and shapes.

Actually, there could be no line without width or size. What exists, is the boundary between object and object, which is rather expressed by color and shape. A line that produces a shape is, as it were, an abstraction of existence. But without that line, the existence cannot be expressed. It is impossible to revive the existence unless sacrificing the representation of the thing, abstracting only the characteristic of it and simplifying it. Therefore, the completed work is another thing different from the

actual figure of given object, and they are often deformed. But it could not become an art work otherwise.

Essentially, our perception is realized by abstracting something. On seeing nature, we humans and animals see it abstracting what is necessary for ourselves or themselves. Abstraction is to derive a distinct feature, but at the same time it is also to omit the others. Without omitting, no essence is expressed.

Taking Japanese traditional performing art, Noh, Zeami says that the performer of the old man must express the likeness of the elderly by the mind keeping quietness and by the eyes looking far.<sup>2</sup> As known from this, it is the art in Noh that catches the core part of the role at one point and in one breath and expresses the whole of the role in a simple pose. Zeami already said that it is necessary to abstract the essence and omit the not-essential in order to learn the truth of object. That was so-called Zeami's realism.

In his book "Abstraction and Empathy", Worringer, art historian, asserted that human beings' art originated from the abstract impulse, and he counted the concept of abstraction which is part of art-styles, among the principles of beauty, and considered that the abstract-geometric style was the first art-style in human history.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as Worringer inferred, in ancient Egypt and in ancient Mesopotamia, not only square-pyramid shaped pyramids but also many plants, the sun and the moon, even the lightning and the soul were expressed by



geometric-abstract shapes.

However, such representation of phenomenon by abstraction actually began earlier than them. It is true that there are realistic representations of animals among the cave paintings of the late Paleolithic age, but even so, they are based on the ones extracted from actual animals. This abstract expression has developed along with the passage of time. There, generally, people selected out the most significant shape among animals', emphasizing it, minimizing the representation of its details as much as possible, simplifying it by line drawing, and through such process, tried to express the essence of the object. This process towards abstraction develops further from the late Paleolithic Age to the Neolithic Age, until people begin to express trees, souls, vortices and chaos by straight lines, curves, circles and concentric circles, crosses and rectangles. They also expressed gods and spirits and so on, omitting the representation of details of man's face and simplifying it. A lot of highly geometricized and stylized abstract paintings are found in primitive art as well as in savage tribe art. We should say that the expression of things themselves by abstraction began when human beings stood on the ground and became aware of the world around them. Art is just the awareness of the world.

Cezanne also restrained expression of the subject as much as possible, and created his own style by pushing ahead with his persistent observation of the nature to its extreme. He extracted a few of limited shapes and colors from complicated subject matter, re-organized them geometrically, and thereby tried to approach

the solemnity of unchanged things. He tried to express the truth of things by reducing nature to simplified colors and shapes and by reorganizing the objective relationship between those colors and shapes.

However, this abstraction is what resulted from gazing at things persistently, and therefore it is neither arbitrary experiment nor deformation. Cezanne was a realistic abstract artist thoroughly. In Cezanne's expression, there is primitive innocence of vision rooted in admiration to the existence itself, which reminds us of the beginning of art in ancient times. The passion of that time when Paleolithic people painted their pictures of animals in the caves, survives in Cezanne's still life and landscape continuously.

### **Symbol**

Through omitting all the nonessential, leaving only the most important point, and repeating such abstraction, symbol is made. Artists simplify shapes and treat lines, points, shapes and colors symbolically. And they let one shape include some meaning. At the moment, the shape is not only a mere shape but becomes a certain symbol representing the whole of something. Indeed, human beings have created the various shapes symbolizing the life and the universe, the heaven and the earth, such as prehistoric cave paintings, indigos, menhirs, dolmens, ancient pyramids and temples.

The meaning of activity of art is to express the infinite in

symbolic forms. If we can create a symbol, the recognition by symbolic method can express something far away beyond the creator. It can let each visible shape express the invisible. It is the role of symbolic method that makes the invisible perceivable through symbols. It may also be said to be a suggestive expression that, by showing concrete objects, expresses what is behind them. Human beings are animals expressing something by symbols, and art creation is based on such human beings' nature. Symbol is the means for human beings to understand the nature of things and the world around them and to communicate each other. That is why art is necessary for human beings.

Probably the expression of Noh of our country is one pole of symbolic expression. The stage of Noh is simplified thoroughly, and the action of the performer is also extremely restricted. However, the most essential shape remains in its extremely simple action and it attracts the audience. For example, the representation of crying in Noh is expressed by casting the Noh mask down and placing both hands with their stretched fingers aligned in front of the mask, as if they wiped tears out of wet eyes. Only these actions express sorrow, but the pose with downcast eyes looks beautiful. In case of expressing lamentation, the performer puts both his hands in front of the mask looking down, or in case of much heavier lamentation, he bends both his knees. In case of anger, it is expressed by turning Noh mask's direction acutely and instantaneously, and pleasure is expressed by turning the mask upward slightly and illuminated. In Noh, the performer's walking a few steps symbolizes just a journey of thousands of miles, and only by the performer's raising the mask

slightly upwards a thousand miles away city is reminded. In the expression of Noh, the performer's slight gesture symbolizes and implies everything.

Actually, "Aoi no Ue" by Zeami, adopts a quite symbolic expression of only putting a kosode (kimono with short sleeves) ornamented with embroidery at the front of the stage in order to represent sick Aoi no Ue in bed. The state where the spirit of Rokujo no Miyasudokoro, the former love of Hikaru Genji, goes crazy with jealousy, is symbolized by the figure of Shite (the main character) in Noh costume ornamented with scale pattern and with a mask of female demon, Hannya.

Noh, "Aoi no Ue"



Noh, "Nonomiya"



And a series of her figures persuaded by Yokawa no Kohijiri's Buddhist prayer and leaving the hashigakari (passageway to the Noh stage), symbolizes the ardent sorrow of a woman who cries in the shameful of destiny of love. In addition, in "Nonomiya", a same Noh play by Zeami, Rokujo no Miyasudokoro's subtle action of returning her leg while putting it

forward under the torii (gateway at the entrance to a Shinto shrine) of Nonomiya Shrine, expresses the sorrowful moment that she is consumed with last love while deciding her parting from Hikaru Genji, symbolically. In Noh, infinite passion is crystallized in such restrained expressions, and actually the rich power for expression is obtained. Noh is a high-level symbolic poetic play which draws out the infinite imagination of audience by making full use of symbolic methods.

It is necessary to abstract in order to symbolize, and it is necessary to omit in order to abstract. In order to express the essence, to deny something is requested. By cutting off what is not essential, and by repeating such cutting off, what is left last must be extracted. Noh might be the ultimate amongst such denial arts. Noh cuts any superfluity and exaggeration off, and consistently tries to imply what is in the deep part. In fact, on the Noh stage, there is no property, and even if there are, they are limited to plain objects such as simple artificial products, and therefore, the stage condenses into one point of Shite's gesture. The Shite's gesture also denies all human body's natural gesture, and is summarized in a typical gesture, and, based on this, on the contrary, tries to express the life of natural gesture of man sharply. It is similar to the case of painting in India ink that denies color, and tries to express all things only with shades of black ink. In Noh, at last, even what the performer's gesture symbolizes is forgotten at all, and a little motion itself must be to come close to the audience as a huge entity. Actually, Zeami who completed Noh play, said in "Kakyō(Glass of Flower)"

“There is something to be attracted in being Sabisabi

(Quiet Simplicity), which is said as Hietaru-Kyoku (Restrained Tune).”<sup>4</sup>

and positioned “Hieta-Gei” (Restrained Art) on the highest state of Noh. Indeed, in the “Sekidera Komachi” which is rarely played today, Shite keeps sitting in a simple stage property shaped a straw-thatched roof house, without moving around an hour and a half at the beginning of Noh play of two hours stage time. In addition to this, the focus of this Noh is placed just on this one hour and a half during which no movement occurs at all. There, the performer kills not only his personal feelings but also his mind trying to express something, and by performing only in his heart without performing physically, he makes the audience’s mind condense to one point and impresses them deeply. In the same “Kakyō”, Zeami says,

“In state being selfless, by having such innocent mind as hide my mind also to myself, connect the times before and after the time without performing. This is just the power of sensibility that would connect everything with your whole mind”, and in addition to this, says “Doing nothing is interesting”.<sup>5</sup> This statement would be of the denial beauty and of the highest state of denial art. Through denying, the truth comes out vividly.

Art creation is one of the expressive activities. It is neither the externalization of subjective sensibility nor the copy of objective object. It is the reproduction of the essence of existence, the representation of it, and the awareness of it. Art expresses the reality of objects as shapes and images, and expresses the truth of existence. The truth expressed by color and form, is the beauty. To

express is to reveal the truth of existence, and to bring it out to light. Then, the truth of existence arises and reveals its appearance. The expression of the truth is to express the truth, and, at the same time, for the truth to express, too. By the truth's arrival into the subject which expresses, the truth dwelling in the object also becomes apparent. And then, the truth is re-recognized and aware. Things become things, and the world becomes the world. The source of existence in which both religion and philosophy are rooted, is also the source of art.

## 2 Expression of Life

### **Cezanne and van Gogh**

As shown in the famous Monet's work "Impression, Sunrise" of 1872, the work of Impressionist Monet pursued the impression of light consistently, and as the result, the shapes of objects disappeared, and only fluid light was left there. In contrast, Cezanne tried to fix the impressionists' landscape floating together with the wave of light. What Cézanne wanted to grasp was not the momentary impression of nature, but the existence of nature itself. Thus, Cezanne tried to compose colors and shapes, and organize them architecturally in order to fix the flux and transition of the light.



Monet "Impression, Sunrise"

All things in nature are moving. Nature does not stop becoming and changing. It is true that painting is forced to fix the things that don't stop moving, in order to look at them, but it was Cezanne who did this most strictly. He tried to reduce the dynamic to the static and to express the truth of things by the static. Therefore, in Cezanne's work, not only scenery and still life, but also person is equally expressed as the static visual image. Cézanne chose only one image among the infinite changes of nature and tried to condense the entire nature into it. In such a way, he tried to catch the essence of things as well as the life of things. There was a deep sensibility of this artist who forgot all the other things and devoted himself to look at the nature directly.

On the other hand, Van Gogh was also influenced by the Impressionists and tried to overcome Impressionism as well as Cezanne, but in contrast to Cezanne, he tried to paint the dynamic in the static, and to paint the dynamic dynamically. Van



Gogh's painting is dynamic and passionate, and the burning of life itself is painted there.

Van Gogh, painter of light and color, began to paint like possessed by something especially after Arles period. As "The Sewer" of 1888 shows, he painted the scorching sun, golden wheat, cypress and sunflower as if he ate the nature up. The "Road with Cypress and Star" of 1890 painted with swirling touches also reminds us of the swirl pattern of the Neolithic and Celtic era in Europe. The nature that van Gogh painted is always wriggling and gasping, and even when he painted the field, the earth, the moon and the star, it seems as if they were always being pulled into the vortex of the universe. The flames and whirlpools Van Gogh's painted are the violent symbol of life. Van Gogh tried to paint it as a vortex of colors straightly, and for that purpose, he liked to use pure strong colors, especially yellow. Van Gogh's yellow tone expresses the swirling life.



Van Gogh "Road with Cypress and Star"



Van Gogh "Bedroom in Arles"

Van Gogh's solitude short lifetime which had no other choice but to escape for madness and suicide, was a continuation of distress and anxiety, but what Van Gogh continued to pursue and desire to express through struggle with them, was the burning of life, the trust in the earth and the thirst for the infinite. At the end of the 19th century when the trust in nature's vitality had been lost, what Van Gogh desired was the peace of life and its salvation. It is also expressed in "Bedroom in Arles" painted with vivid colors in 1888.

Art is the expression of the reality of things and the expression of the life of things. All things change and do not stay at the same place. It is the becoming, the transiting and the flux. The painting tries to express it by points, lines, planes and colors. The point on painting is the point with spread, and the line is also the line as action and filled with life. The planes and the colors are also the self-expressions of the life. Art is to project the life into the temporal and spatial composition.

In order to express the reality of things or the life of things, there are two ways, namely, the abstract-symbolic expression and the lively-passionate expression, just like man's bone and body. While the abstract-symbolic way expresses rather the dynamic in the static, the lively-passionate expression expresses the static in the dynamic. Cezanne is rather true of the former and Van Gogh is of the latter, but there is no difference between them in their efforts to express the life itself.

Indeed, things pass away without stopping still for a moment. In order to express the life of things, it is necessary to choose a moment passing away. Just before that moment, every combination of things was not in the current state, and similarly, after that moment has passed, every combination will have changed. Painting is a spatial art, and generally it is based on the denial of time. Painting catches a moment. It catches a moment of movement and change. From the attempt to express what is eternal in this moment, two different ways towards the end are derived, either static or dynamic. And, by these two expressive ways being interwoven, the fruitful history of painting has been developed.

### **Sesshu and Jakuchu**

Two tendencies of art stated above are also confirmed in the art history of our country. For example, Sesshu's landscape painting would be typical of abstract-symbolic expression. Indeed, the famous "Sansui-Chokan" (Long Scroll of Landscapes), is based on his strict observation and sketch of the nature. However, it denies color and expresses the dynamic in a tranquil scene with accurate, strict lines and black and white shading of India ink, and with the simplified three-dimensional composition. Although all things such as rocks, mountains, trees and rivers, castle walls, towers, people and so on, are represented by simple and natural lines, they are alive. Even in the volume of spring scene of harbor, a fresh feeling of life of the early spring is conveyed from the soft movement of young branches of willow. Just by using only Indian ink, subtle changes of season, time and emotion are expressed

through every volume. Also in “Shuto-Sansui-zu” (Tokei )

(Landscapes of Autumn and Winter (Winter Landscape)), the vertical line drawn as if the cliff extended to slit the heaven, expresses the real sense of cosmic life magnificently. Just beneath the extension of that vertical line, one figure is painted in a simplified form. Therefore, the entire universe seems to be focused on this figure, who is probably Sesshu himself. Every painted thing symbolizes a dynamic tension of life.



Sesshu “Shuto-Sansui-zu” (Tokei)



Sesshu “Haboku-Sansui-zu”

While “Sansui-Chokan” painted by Sesshu at the age of sixty-seven years old in 1486, was one of the highly completed landscape paintings, “Haboku-Sansui-zu” (Broken Ink Landscape) was executed by Sesshu at the age of seventy-six years old in 1495, about a decade later, and it seems to indicate the ultimate pole of both abstraction and symbolization in landscape painting. Indeed this work shows the framework of

landscape simply at the foreground only with shading of Indian ink, expressing the actual landscape itself symbolically. The standing-up rock painted lightly in a distant view expresses not only the height of the sky, but also the sense of infinite distance from the foreground. The houses, rocks and plants painted in extremely simplified way expresses even the premonition of the storm that would come soon.

It is certain that, as one pole of the artistic expressions in our country, there is a tendency to intensify abstraction and symbolization and to express the entire universe's movement and life in a simply summarized expression.

On the other hand, it is also certain that in the artistic expression of our country, there is another tendency to paint the details carefully and to express the flood of life dynamically and passionately.

For example, Jakuchu Ito, painter with unique talent in Kyoto of middle Edo period, painted his unique Doshoku Sai-e (Pictures of the Colorful Realm of Living Beings) in which, displaying his extraordinary sensibility, unique vision and ingenious constitutive power, he painted flowers, grasses, birds, beasts, insects and shells etc., with extreme precision, and filled all over the picture by repetition of the same shapes and colors. For that reason, every picture of Doshoku Sai-e is full of dense energy overwhelming the viewers.



Jakuchu "Gunkei-zu"



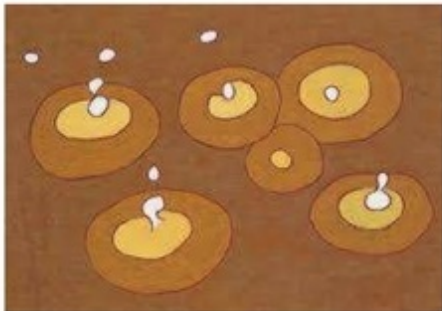
Jakuchu "Chihen Gunchu-zu"

As his well-known story, Jakuchu kept dozens of fowls at home, observed them closely and painted them as a group. In his "Gunkei-zu" (Painting of Fowls), each feather of fowl is painted to the details and spreads like a swirl, and therefore, each fowl seems to insist on each own existence and crow for each own. In "Chihen Gunchu-zu" (Insects at a Pond) in the same picture series, plenty of frogs and tadpoles, dragonflies, cicadas, snakes, rashes, spiders, etc. are arranged, and in addition, gourds and their leaves are painted all over the picture. However none of them bears their role with priority, and there is no center anywhere in the picture, but each of them becomes central respectively and claims its own life. Jakuchu expressed the vitality and energy of life in such choking-up way.

### **Morikazu Kumagai and Isson Tanaka**

These contrasting tendencies to express the life of things can be found in the contemporary art field of Japan, too.

A typical example of abstract-symbolic expression is probably the style that Morikazu Kumagai reached in his later years. Morikazu picked up familiar creatures or nature scenes, isolated each of them with a simple contour line. And he extracted the shape of object, colored it with simple color flatly, and, basing on the combination of these color and shape, expressed the reality of things themselves. The line, color and shape are arranged so that each of them determines itself, and as the result, the work seems to be decided as if there were no other expression. This expressive way seems to have exceeded Cezanne.



Morikazu Kumagai "Uteki"

For example, in his "Uteki" (Raindrops) of 1961, although there is no contour line of water or rain actually, it seems that the raindrops and ripples isolated by severe contour lines express themselves vividly. Moreover, it seems that each raindrop is alive as if it were carrying the life of the universe. Here is the clear eye of this painter who can catch the whole phenomenon with a single point.

However, Morikazu's work is never so-called abstract

painting. It was the abstraction and simplification at the ultimate pole where the real and concrete has been pursued thoroughly. Because it was such abstraction and simplification that restrained technique to the limit, it could express an extraordinary reality of things successfully. Morikazu's work approaches the core of thing as if it appeared only as this one in this universe. By cutting off all unnecessary things, it catches the life of thing itself. Morikazu's work is a shape of life, expressing the life that has neither shape nor color, in the visible shape. Here is this painter's peculiar eyesight to look at the nature more closely, to see things more thoroughly, and to gaze at even the little alive being that breaths in it. "Akaari" (Red Ants) of 1971 is also a simple painting that a few of ants are crawling on the whole other ground, but here is also a gaze of this painter that tries to find the life in small familiar creatures and catch the moment movements of such living beings, which gives this work a clear and marvelous feeling of life.

However, we should remember that, in the background of Morikazu's work expressing the life, there was another eye of this painter who had always looked at death straightly. "Butsuzen" (Before the Tablet of The Deceased) of 1948 was painted in the next year after the death of his daughter, Man, who died in pulmonary tuberculosis after World War II. Although this work is composed of only a black colored basin, three white colored eggs, a brown colored flower tube and a candle stand simply, because the objects to paint are limited to only these and all the other unnecessary are omitted, the deeper sadness is full of all over the work through the contrast produced between the black of tray and



the white of eggs. This is a mysterious work with stillness as if the viewers were swallowed up. Because he gazed at death deeply, he could discern life properly.

On the other hand, as a good example of dynamic-passionate expression of the life of things in contemporary Japanese painting, we could name Tanaka Isson who closed his solitary lifetime. In 1958, having left everything, Isson Tanaka moved to Amami Oshima and continued to paint subtropical animals and plants there. His eye that gazes at the objects is sharp, and in spite of the restrained expression, he painted out the vitality of life created by the tropical climate, with rich colors.

“Kuwazuimo to Sotetsu” (Alocasia Odora and Cycad) painted around 1975, is probably one of Isson’s masterpieces. In this work, green leaves of kuwazuimo and male flowers and female flowers of sotetsu are arranged boldly in the morning sunshine, and the sky and the sea can be seen far away through the leaves, and in front of the horizon, the reef called <Tachigami>(Reef Representative of a Kami) in the area, are painted symbolically. Leaves and flowers, the sea and the rocks painted all over the picture, insist on their identities respectively, and each of them is given its life, being alive vividly. It is a work with a strange power that conveys stifling vigor in spite of a silent picture. The sense of stifling tension of life strikes the viewers’ hearts.



Tanaka Isson "Kuwazuimo to Sotetsu"



Tanaka Isson "Adan no Ki"

Isson's another masterpiece comparable to "Kuwazuimo to Sotetsu", "Adan no Ki" (Pandanus Palm Tree) around 1975, is painted with a unique composition where a large adan tree and its fruits are set at the foreground, and from among the branches of adan tree, the horizontal line are looked far away. The keen leaves like spear and the fruits of adan tree at the foreground convey the vitality of the southern island, and it seems to come closer to the viewer. Pebbles covering all over the beach, quietly rapping ripples, rocks standing on the seashore, etc. are painted one by one in detail, each showing the glow of life. The horizon seen in the distance suggests a paradise beyond the sea and causes emotion for the infinite. However, in this work, a huge thundercloud is also painted over the horizon, which is apt to produce a vague feeling of anxiety. This work is also so mysterious that, while severe tranquility drifts throughout the painting, it makes us feel the euphoria of life.

## Noh and Kabuki

If we try to find such two contrasting tendencies of artistic expression in Japanese theater history, it is probably the difference between Noh and Kabuki. Of these, Noh attempts to extract a certain passion itself by thorough abstraction and symbolization, to give it a form, and to express the infinite in its ultimate form. In Noh, the complete life is felt in a momentary pose. Zeami called this manifestation of life as “flower”. Noh’s life is in flower. Zeami compares beauty of performance to flower, and says that to know flower is just the essence of Noh. To become a beautiful flower in front of the audience’s eyes is what Noh should aim ultimately.

As well known, Zeami divided this <flower> into “Jibun no Hana” (Flower of the Moment) and “Makoto no Hana” (Flower of the Truth) in “Fushikaden” (The Flowering Spirit).<sup>6</sup> “Jibun no Hana” means the natural beauty of boy, in other words, the elegance of performance that looks good to audience’s eyes and can attract the audience by nice conditions of age and body. However, “Jibun no Hana” will fade and pass away someday. In contrast, “Makoto no Hana” is the beauty of old age which is restored after “Jibun no Hana” has been lost and is expressed by art. The flower that is not lost even if the performer has been old, in other words, the artistic elegance of performance that has an indescribable depth, even if it is such kind of Noh that is difficult to understand where its goodness is, it is “Makoto no Hana”. The more the flesh fails, the more the performance must be fresh. But

at the same time, Zeami admonishes that in order not to lose “Makoto no Hana” even in the advanced age, the performer must be aware of his grade of art fully, improve his art by aiming for the higher grade and become innocent finally. Flower is what is interesting and at the same time, what is unique.

“Flower is a unique flower in the mind of the audience”,<sup>7</sup> Zeami said. Flower that blooms year by year is the same in color and shape, but it is unique year by year. Like flower that blooms as the same one when the season has come, performance must be also such art as always gives the audience fresh impression. Zeami called such creative performance as “flower”. However, it is neither to show unusual performance, nor to make the eccentric expression to attract audience’s attention intentionally. It must be such freshness as, after having made exhaustive efforts for original idea and having polished his performance constantly, would bloom with such polished-up performance as seed finally.

But the same flower is unique because it falls and disappears. Because flower falls, it is interesting when blooms.

“In the first place, flower is interesting because of blooming, and unique because of falling.”<sup>8</sup>

Zeami said also in “Syugyokutokka” (Gathering Gems and Gaining Flowers). Because flower falls, it is beautiful the moment it blooms. <Flower> that Zeami says is considered not as eternal, but as transitory. Nothing stays at the same place at the moment. Flower’s life is also short. However, Zeami defined this ‘no place to stay’ as <flower>. It is certain that a traditional aesthetic consciousness of our country that has found beauty in ephemera and sadness in decay, lay there.

Like plum flowers blooming in the snow, flowers appear vividly from nothing when the time has come. <Flower> that Zeami said, means the life that appears for a moment, and it indicates the vivid appearance of life and the fascination of expression as appearance of life.

On the other hand, Kabuki, unlike Noh, put its emphasis on dynamic dance rather than static dance, and by increasing the fun of exaggerated fighting scene and gimmicks, and further by incorporating the abundant sound elements and the vivid color elements that appeal to visual sense, has strengthened the spectacular characteristics accompanying the kaleidoscopic change of scenes. In this way, mixing with improvisatory and changing-freely performances, Kabuki expresses the constantly changing phases of life and the various fates of human beings in the universe's transformation on the decorative and picturesque stage. In that point, it produced such kind of art that is extremely rich in theatrical characteristics. It was the expression of life in the dynamic and passionate direction. In that respect, certainly it was the expression of life as well as Noh, but it was in the opposite direction to Noh. Kabuki was the theatrical play with a Dionysus-like baroque character.

Not only in our country but also in any cultural sphere and in any period, there are two contrasting directions of artistic expression, the abstract-symbolic and the dynamic-passionate, and both have enriched the art by cooperating or crossing each

other. Art is the expression of the reality of things and the expression of the life of things. The significance of art lies there.

### 3 The Expressed Universe

#### **Remains of Borobudur**

A large Buddhist remains, Borobudur Temple, located in the Kedu Basin in the middle Java of Indonesia, was built in the Shailendra dynasty at the end of the eighth century, and it consists in nine layers of staircase pyramids in total composed of a rectangular base at the bottom, five rectangular square bases on it and three circular bases on them. There are many reliefs on Buddhist tales aligned clockwise on each layer wall of the rectangular bases, and there are many Buddha statues and stupas (pagoda) on the circular bases, a part of these Buddha statues being housed inside the bell-shaped stupas. At the center of this temple, there is a large stupa connecting heaven and earth, whose inside is hollow.



Borobudur Temple

The three-layer structure of Borobudur Temple represents the three worlds of Buddhism (the realm of desire, the realm of

form, the realm of non-form) (kāmadhātu, rūpadhātu, ārūpyadhātu), and it shows that the arrival at the top floor means the arrival at the world of spiritual enlightenment that transcends everything in this world. This stone building is the passage connecting the human world and the Buddha world.

While people go around the corridor to climb the building, they exorcize their sin and impurity and enter the world of spiritual enlightenment. The reliefs carved there represent the training process of Bodhisattva based on the story of the previous life of Buddha and the pilgrimage journey of Zenzaidoji (Sudhanakumāra, one of children in Buddhism) in “Kegon-kyo Nyuhokkai-bon” (Gandavyūha Sūtra in Avataṃsaka Sūtra),

This stone building is a huge three-dimensional mandala symbolizing the Buddhist cosmic view that is descended from Esoteric Law, and represents the thought, “Ichisoku-Issai, Issai-Sokuichi” (One is All, All is One). The true life of the universe is expressed as all living beings in this world, and Buddha nature resides in all the living beings. The whole of this temple is the hosshin (dharma body/dharma-kaaya) of Buddha, and especially the world on the platforms of circular bases is the embodiment of cosmic law (dharma), and besides, the stupa’s hollow at the center represents the Mahayana Buddhist thought, kū(emptiness /śūnya). Borobudur Temple is the symbolic expression of the universe. The whole of this stone building is one microcosm that reflects the universe. This temple building is based on such symbolism.

The expression of countless reliefs curved on this stone

building with skilled compositions and sophisticated techniques is elegant to the details and is full of vitality of life. Therefore, the whole of this temple may be seen as a great art work, but its greatness as art work seems based on the cosmology transcending it. Great art always expresses the universal.

Sacred buildings, such as temples and shrines, are the symbol of the universe. The sacred space exists at the center of the universe, and the circular or rectangular buildings spreading from the center are the likenesses of the universe. The construction of them symbolizes the creation of the universe, and, at the same time, symbolizes the eternal universe itself. Indeed, the artistic nature of the sacred building has its origin in such point.

### **The Rock Garden of Ryoanji Temple**

The thought that art is the expression of the universal is also found in Buddhist temples and their gardens in Japan.

Especially the rock garden of Ryoanji Temple in Kyoto is well known in this respect. On arriving at the rock garden of Ryoanji Temple, what catches people's eye at first is several large and small natural stones that are disposed on the vast ground covered with white sands. These fifteen large and small stones show a loose irregular arc as a whole. These stones seem to be placed without intention, but each stone seems alive because all of the stones are disposed by some delicate design. Each stone interacts, adapts, harmonizes and resonates to each other so that each stone could express their own goodness. The center of incomplete arc consisting in fifteen stones seems placed a little



ahead of the entrance of hojo (abbot's chamber), but, because of being obscured intentionally, it could be clear only in the viewer's heart.



The Rock Garden of Ryoanji Temple

The stones seem like rocks or islands located in the huge ocean or river. The dazzling white sands laid all over the whole garden leave the splendid trace made by broom, which looks like reflecting ripples on the sea surface, or like the choppy ocean. The waves of white sands resonate with the large and small stones and the scene looks like a rocky shore with waves crashing.

Because not only the rock garden of Ryoanji Temple but also the Karesansui gardens constructed in the Muromachi period of our country, by limiting the materials for their expression to stone, sand, water and shrub, and by repeating omission of the unnecessary, attained their thorough abstraction, they give the viewer the image beyond the visible sight. In the rock garden of Ryoanji Temple, even water and trees are omitted. It is an ultimate abstraction. Because abstraction has been attained thoroughly, on the contrary, it expresses something symbolically, and what is more, its expression strikes us strongly.

The tense space inside this rock garden surrounded by earth wall connects with the trees such as pine trees, the clouds and the sky as the background, therefore it is not closed. The stone arrangement is also connected to not only every direction of north, south, east and west but also the movement of the sun during the day as well as the moon and the stars at night. So, the rock garden changes its appearance variously from season to season. It is a fluid scene that allows the temporal and spatial becoming and changing.

It is said that the rock garden of Ryoanji Temple is the work by Soami in Muromachi period, but it is not certain. Because it has been modified several times since then, this rock garden that we see today, is not necessarily as it was at the time of construction. Especially because it is confirmed that perspective is adopted actually, there is also a possibility that the traces of construction after Azuchi Momoyama period are involved. In addition, it is recorded that a considerable scale of repair was made after the fire of Kansei era in Edo period. If so, it might also be said that the current composition of the rock garden of Ryoanji Temple has been formed by a series of chances of history in a sense. But the creation of art is like that.

On standing at the rock garden of Ryoanji Temple, the viewer feels like asked riddles, and the world he/she did not know comes out in his/her mind. This stone garden is made so that various images would come into the subjective mind of the viewer absorbed in it personally, rather than the stone arrangement in the white sand ground insists in a certain meaning as the object.

In other words, the source of mystery of the rock garden of Ryoanji Temple seems lying in the fact it leaves its way of art creation to the images that would come out for the first time when the subject and the object meet. Therefore, this rock garden can be interpreted variously depending on how each viewer would take it. On watching the rock garden with the hojo behind, various thoughts will come to the viewer, but the interpretation of them is left to the viewer, the recipient.

The origin of our country's garden began with condensing the great nature, for example, sea, river, mountain and island, and making its miniature. It was accompanied with a cosmic consciousness to condense the universe in a narrow space of garden. The stones and white sands of the rock garden of Ryoanji Temple also express the becoming universe. The choppy lines of white sands might symbolize the infinite flux and generation of the universe, and the stones might symbolize not only mountains, rivers and plants generated from the flux of the universe, but also even the stars, the planets and the galaxy.

However, what arises from the undulation of the universe is also a mass of earthly desire in a sense. Galaxies and stars, mountains and trees, stones and we, human beings are all suffering from earthly desire, life and death. But without earthly desire, there is no becoming. Unless there is a desperation, there is no life and no death. Earthly desire whirls, and this real world arises. Moreover, as each of large and small stones is sinking down below the choppy white sands, the mass of the earthly desire also is going back into the flux of the universe.

Certainly this rock garden expresses the cosmological. As the forehead written “MujoJinsoku ShojiJidai” (Everything is uncertain and passes away promptly. The most important is to face birth and death earnestly) is set on the way of entering from the kuri (kitchen of a Buddhist temple) to Hojo of Ryoanji Temple, this rock garden was the symbolic expression of the truth of Buddhism such as Bonno Soku Bodai (Earthly desires are just a pure aspiration to enlightenment.) and Shoji-Soku-Nehan (The sufferings of life and death are nirvana.), wasn't it? As the bottom rectangular base of Borobudur's stone architecture represents the world of earthly desire in Buddhism, there is no enlightenment without earthly desire. It is just earthly desire that supports enlightenment.

### **Tea Ceremony and Flower Arrangement**

In general, the art completed in Japan from Muromachi period to Sengoku period has the general tendency to condense the whole working of the universe to one ultimate point and to find the expression of beauty there. Tea ceremony is typical of them. In particular, Wabi-cha (Tea ceremony of refined simplicity) abolished the exotic taste of the past, and, by cutting zashikikazari (a set of decorative features) off to a minimum and simplifying the manners, pursued the beauty of simplicity and tranquil elegance. As the period has passed from Murata Juko, through Takeno Shoo, to Sen no Rikyu, the tea ceremony room itself also became narrower gradually, from four and a half to two tatami mats room finally. As the result, atmosphere in the tea

ceremony room became tenser, and its clean and quiet space was full of the dense spirit, and on the contrary, the tea ceremony room was to get an infinite spiritual spread.



tea ceremony room

The host boils the water, prepares tea and offers it before the Buddha, and then recommends it to the guest and drinks it himself finally. To express the heart of Buddha in the series of manner was the heart of Wabi-cha. Indeed, Rikyu's thought was that the manner of tea ceremony itself in the narrow tea room was the training process of Buddhist law. There is also alive the thought that we sense the manifestation of the truth of the universe in our own acting and we find the self that is alive in harmony with the great rhythm of the universe.

As the spring exists in the grass growing from under snow, one of the essences of Japanese art is the way to express the inexhaustible in Muichimotsu (Having nothing), in other words,

to leave only the most important point and to condense the infinite there. It is shown as it is in the tradition of Wabi-cha, too. Probably it could be called the ultimate symbolism which tries to symbolize the life of the universe in the ultimate reached by repeating omission and by repeating denial.

As well as tea ceremony, flower arrangement which has been completed from Muromachi period to Sengoku period, also bases on the same principle. Especially, Rikka (A style of putting flowers in a long and narrow vertical vase) began with offering flowers to Buddha from the beginning. The flower offered in front of the Buddha was Yorishiro (Object to which a divine spirit is drawn) for connecting the heaven and the earth and for Buddha's staying. Buddha is welcomed by offering flowers to, and people and Buddha are united in the offered flowers.

Rikka is not to arrange the beauty of flowers. The essence of flowers lies not in full bloom's glamor, but in their life alive in the great nature. It is Rikka that expresses the life of flowers living in the great nature in a shape. Rikka should arrange the flowers' life. Through Rikka, the great nature and the universe must appear. Ikenobo Sen'ou who completed the flower arrangement, called this matter "Fukyo" (Tastefulness) . Rikka is a symbolism that tries to express the mystery of the creation of the universe and the true life of the universe in the arranged flowers.

Therefore, also in this case, repeating omission of the unnecessary and repeating condensation must be required for the ultimate abstraction. In the late Edo period, Ikenobo Senjo limited the number of leaves to six and a half for one camellia flower arrangement. However, Ikenobo Senmyo who succeeded it, further cut it down, and finally completed one flower arrangement with three and a half leaves. Indeed, on looking at the draft of Senmyo's one camellia flower arrangement, the life of camellia is splendidly condensed. Therefore, the unchanged essence of the art in Japan that intends to pursue a pure form, to concentrate the universe on one point, and to reach the ultimate goal, seems to work and appear here, too

### **Expression as Karma**

The art in Japan has intuited the life of the great nature even in a small flower that blooms in the field, and has watched the entire universe even in a drop of dew. When flowers bloom, the spring comes and the spring blooms in the flowers. The sound of wind passing through pine trees, the sound of water flowing through valley, the voice of birds flying in the sky, the voice of insects crawling the earth and so on, all these things in nature are the expression of the true life of the universe. All things are working to appear in the universe, and the universe is working to appear in all things. All things are the appearance of the life of the universe and represent the truth as it is.

Certainly, what appears in this world, repeats appearance and disappearance. However, the appearance and disappearance itself is the working of the life of the universe. In spring, flowers bloom, and in autumn, leaves fall, that is the appearance of the

truth as it is. Art tries to express just the truth of this existence.

Moreover, the expressive act itself is also the manifestation of the life of the universe. Without acting, the true life of the universe does not work and does not appear. The act is the work of the universe, and the work of the universe appears through act. The expressive act of art itself is already done in the truth of the universe. While a flower, a bird and all the others are expressed through their own ways of being, art expresses their expression, but this expressive act itself is the appearance of the life of the universe

However, at the same time, this expressive act is also Karma. The expressive act, whether in nature or in art, is a kind of agony. As beautiful purple clouds contain a gloomy storm, the world that is expressed to appear, whether the nature or the human world, is the world of agony filled with desires, struggles, fears, hates and so on in a sense. We are the beings lost by earthly desires and, at the same time, the beings full of difficulties, troubles, contradictions and so on. However, without such spiritual struggles, there would be no salvation. And without earthly desires and passions, there would be also no salvation and no catharsis. The true life of the universe is working to appear just in this world where earthly desires are swirling. Why do human beings eager to make art? The artistic expressive impulse of human beings should be considered from such viewpoint.



**Author's note:**

This treatise is picked out from “The beginning of Art Theory” in *Michinori Kobayashi, “Philosophy of Life” Collection III*, Minervashobo, Kyoto, 2016, by author, and is translated into English with necessary revision and annotation.

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<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Ph.B., Felix Meiner, 1968, S.39ff.

<sup>2</sup>Zeami, “Shugyoku Tokka”, in *Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei 65 : Karon-shu Nohgakuron-shu*, revision and annotation by Minoru Nishio, Iwanamishoten, 1971, p463

<sup>3</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction und Einföhlung*, Piper Verlag 1908 I-1

<sup>4</sup> Zeami, “Kakyō” in *Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei 65 : Karon-shu Nohgakuron-shu*, revision and annotation by Minoru Nishio, Iwanamishoten, 1971, p432

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* pp427-428

<sup>6</sup> Zeami, “Fushikaden”, in *Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei 65 : Karon-Shu Nohgakuron-shu*, revision and annotation by Minoru Nishio, Iwanamishoten, 1971, pp361-362

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* Chaper III, pp388

<sup>8</sup>Zeami, “Shugyokutokka”, in *Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei 65 : Karon-shu Nohgakuron-shu*, revision and annotation by Minoru Nishio, Iwanamishoten, 1971, p456