

Letter from Japan - a romance

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Shuncho (late Edo) Three ladies; Teahouse, Kyoto; Shodo, Robin Richmond

In 1981, in *Our House to Bauhaus*, Tom Wolfe made a typically barbed criticism of the “whiteness & lightness & leanness & cleanness & bareness & sparseness” of modern design. In this seminal essay he debunked minimalism, insisting that it was a condemnation and rejection of pleasure.

I have been thinking a lot about design since my recent trip to Japan.

You can't not.

So much of what one sees in Japan is about design. The table settings, the food, the buildings, the art, the furniture, the trees, the clothes.... My own sense of design might kindly be termed “maximalist” (though not at all partial to Wolfe’s liking for damask) but I have long admired – from a great distance – the elegant austerity and aestheticism of the classical Japanese style. Zen gardens, sliding *shoji* screens, *ikebana* flower arrangements, *tatami* mats, tea bowls, kimonos, sake dishes, futons, the visual and culinary balance of a meal known as *kaseiki*, the screens, calligraphy, and the amazing art – the whole bento box.

So for years I have been drawn to a simplicity of style that is so very unlike my own, plagued as I am by an over-active superego and an ingrained Puritan work ethic. I know that I am prone to overwork a painting. Sometimes spoiling it. Learning, in Kyoto, how to paint a simple stroke of ink across a sheet of paper without hesitation –

shodo - has been a revelation to me as an artist. Copying Buddhist sutras in Koyasan in a mountain-top monastery - *shakyo* - drove me completely mad, but taught me how impatient I am. Watching the eminent kimono painter, the Hisatsune Kaga Yuzen Master, work on a single wedding kimono (it was going to take 3 months and cost a fortune) was deeply humbling. A morning in the old town of Kanazawa, talking about how he makes making a *raku* tea bowl for the *chado*, the tea ceremony, with the great Master Toshio Ohi Chozaemon, who has inherited his grand title after 11 generations, has shown me how much, in his very own words, I overthink my work. Zen I am not.

But inside this maximalist lurks a minimalist.

My fascination with Japan goes back a long way. When I was five, my father brought me back a treasure from his travels. She was an elaborately dressed geisha doll, with a delicately painted face, pearly combs and hairpins in her blackest of wigs. She carried a hand-painted fan in her tiny porcelain hand and wore a full dress kimono, a silk *obi* sash and a silk chord, an *obijime*, to secure the *obi* belt, and she wore *tabi* socks with a split between the big and second toe and wooden *zori* sandals. All the details were right. I was smitten. Later, as a bookish teenager, I spent a summer living vicariously in the 11th century court with the Lady Murasaki's *Tale of Genji* and then I moved on to violent tales of gallant and not so gallant samurai in *Shogun*. (I tried it again while I was in Japan. Almost unreadable.) When I could afford it, as I began to become known as an artist, I bought myself inks and expensive Japanese brushes and tried to learn the art of scroll painting. Not very successfully.

So for me Japan has long been a literary and art historical romance. Worthy of the most naïve Victorian gentlewoman traveller. And I know that it's all been mostly in my head. From books and paintings. *Japonisme* became a great fad in 19th century Paris and London when Japan began to open itself up to the western world and woodblock prints began to find their way into cheap antique shops. Prints by Hiroshige, Hokusai, Shuncho, and Utamaro, *ukiyo-e* artists from Edo, now known as Tokyo, brought images of the Floating World to Europe. There are so many artists whom I love who were once as besotted with Japan as I am. Look at Manet's portrait of his friend the writer Emile Zola. A Japanese print is pinned up behind the leonine head of the great writer. Look at Monet's portrait of his wife Camille, standing proud in her kimono, and marvel at his water garden at Giverny with its banks of iris and its Japanese footbridge. Look at Whistler and his nocturnes of the Thames. It might be Edo. And lately much has been made of the influence of these prints on Van Gogh, who owned and copied many of them.

So as much a victim of *Japonisme* as my illustrious forebears, unlike most of them I have now actually visited the country. And I, so romantically inclined, have not been disappointed. It's been wonderful and also very strange. Social codes are different. I admired a glorious hand-built plate in a restaurant in Kyoto and was ceremoniously, and embarrassingly given it as a gift. Lovely. Objects look and act differently. Unfamiliar. There are heaters that speak to you. Slippers - very important to take off ones shoes everywhere - that are used ONLY in the bathroom. Toilets with heated seats that have at least 5 functions. Rubbish etiquette is a learning curve. It involves

taking one's rubbish home. There are no rubbish bins but it is the cleanest place I have ever been. Learning to leap off trains when they stop for the very shortest of times is a skill to be mastered. Navigating Tokyo is an art. Allowing oneself to be shepherded as a meek and mild pedestrian by a very strict policeman in a peaked cap and white gloves is a test of one's autonomy. When I decide to cross the street is *my* decision in Europe.

It will take me a while to work it all out, if I ever do. But like so many artists before me, and so many artists who will come after me, I am back in the studio now, with my collection of books and postcards of the most amazing paintings, and my stock of brand new Japanese brushes and my ink grinding stone, and my *Washi* paper and all my memories. I am trying to paint the gardens, the trees, the glorious temples, the cherry blossom and oh dear, the ultimate cliché – the astonishing sight of snow-capped Mount Fuji.

Watch this space.