

Beauty in the One and the Many

An Introductory Essay on the Science and Art of Flower Arrangement

The rise of a civilization tends to encourage higher forms of esthetic expression, and sometimes it may even result in the development of a new art. Indeed art forms themselves have been regarded as the measurements of culture, so much so that Havelock Ellis once expressed a belief that the spiritual and intelligential grade of a people could be measured by the manner in which they danced.

One need not limit the cultural measure to the dance, nor the dance to that form of art expression which consists basically in the pleasurable or symbolical movements of the limbs and body. In some countries the legs may be of little importance in the dance; in other countries the rhythmical and esthetic movements of the hands, the arms, and the legs may be essential elements in other art forms. This can be observed in the religious rites of Bali, in the court ceremonials of Java and the now defunct regal China, and to a greater or lesser extent in all the arts of Japan.

While in Japan we find distinct dance forms, and the development of choreography along its own paths, we also notice that dancing has tremendously influenced almost all the arts and much of the life of the country. The sacred pilgrimages of the people, including the almost universal, delight in gazing at the cherry blossom, the wisteria and the chrysanthemum, the elaborate rituals of the Tendai and Shingon sects of Buddhism and of the Ryobu-Shintu, the ancient ceremonials of court and temple, the style of dress, the methods of beautifications; all derived elements from the dance form.

Watch the participant in the No-drama—is he an actor or a dancer? Observe the rhythmical movement of the arms, hands and fingers of the koto player, or the strokes of the performer on the samosen. Notice how the painter, in depicting a plum tree, for example, begins as the dancer in silent meditation and expresses a silent music on the screen with his brushes and his paints. In the tea ceremony Japan has given us still another art form in which ethical culture is expressed through the performance of a musicless dance, and finally in Ichibana, we behold still another art form, beauty expressed in the living not-self.

Ichibana, which we usually call “flower arrangement” is, perhaps, more properly, plant arrangement. It is an art form, or expression of beauty through the non-self. To understand its fundamentals, one should bear in mind that the great science-religion of Buddhism denies the ego. If the ego is only to be denied as philosophy, and still remains a component element of our social and political life, its denial has been in vain, and such denial will lead only to hypocrisy and demoralization.

Vocal music or expression of the self through the breath may be regarded as an extreme art form in which the very life participates. For life is the breath and in song and sweet music the soul of man comes to the surface. In the playing of instruments, in the dance, in acting and court ceremonial, in religious mysteries and rites, in poetry and pageantry, the self is being expressed. The Japanese did not deny this self-expression, they developed it as far as they knew how, but rejecting the reality of ego, they held that all man could do was to reveal his imperfection; well and good if this unworthiness and imperfection could be revealed in a beautiful manner, but it was imperfection nevertheless.

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On the other hand, there are those arts which would express beauty through the non-self. Architecture and sculpture stand out preeminently in this field, and perhaps in the Buddhist countries it is not always easy to distinguish them. The use of wood, stone and metal as mediums of expression continues back to the dawn of civilization, and among the religious people the Buddhists went further than any other in these art forms, due, no doubt, to their denial of ego. The Japanese people inherited the esthetic culture of China and India and continued its evolution down to the present day.

Painting, weaving, wood carving, porcelain molding and coloring and many other arts were cultivated in China and Japan, and here again, we are still more or less within the world of non-self. And there is a constant characteristic of these arts of non-self as compared with the arts of self—in the latter, as in dancing and singing, we are not only concerned with self, we are concerned with life; in the former we are not only concerned with non-self, we are concerned with matter. Was it possible to evolve an art form which would not be of the self, which would be of the not-self, and still be based on living processes? Yes! The Orientals found this art in landscape gardening, and the Japanese carried this art over into Ichibana.

The arts of Asia have all been derived from the religions and the religions have all been pervaded with deep philosophy and metaphysics. Spirit and matter, purusha and prakriti, God and nature, Shiva and Shakti, Nirvana and Samsara stand out again and again in the wisdom teachings. The self, where recognized is the Divine Being; the non-self, where recognized is the multiform not-being of nature. Above: the One; below: the many. Both affirmed, both condemned, the One affirmed and the many denied, the many affirmed and the One denied—in these patterns we find all, or almost all the religions and philosophies of Asia.

In landscape gardening we have an art and a science in which the livingness of not-self is used as a medium of esthetic expression. Nature is called upon to bring joy to the hearts of mankind, but in approaching the beautiful along this path, the natural is often aborted, and the artificial may predominate. This does not mean that landscape gardening cannot be a very high form of art, but from the social viewpoint it becomes the sculpture of plant life and mineral life, often embellished by the handiwork of man. And sooner or later, the marble walks, the stone carvings, the granite blocks decay; the elements in landscape gardening do not always belong to the same kingdom; the plant world must either succumb to man on the one hand, and to the self-expression of the mineral on the other. In its turn it may revolt, and an Angkor-Vat or Fatehpur Sikri become buried in vegetation.

That admirable and remarkable people, the Chinese, through hard experience, aided no doubt by the appearance of wise men, at various times, have learned how to utilize every square yard of land for agricultural purposes—there must be no waste. But they did not consider it a waste to utilize even a square yard of land, or less, for beauty's sake. So the flower jar and the flower pot were invented, and even a single little plant became an object of admiration among them.

The Japanese, disciples and imitators of the Chinese, were forced by somewhat different experiences to utilize small plots of ground, to develop miniature orchards and fields, parks and ponds and gardens. But the Japanese have carried on their art forms to this day. Preserved from war and dire poverty during the long period of the Tokagawa Shoguns, they discovered a means of the expression of beauty through the non-self, in living forms, in Ichibana.

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The metaphysics of Ichibana are both ancient and simple. There is the One, all pervading life. Christ expressed it thus: "I am the vine and ye are the branches thereof." The devout Buddhist found the Buddha-nature everywhere, and the master of Ichibana demonstrated his religion in the cooperation between the plant form and himself.

The stem or trunk was the basic One. This one may be said to have three expressions which we may call God, man and nature; or spiritual, mental and material. The merit of these three aspects of life was depicted, rather than reflected, in the arrangement of the branches of the trunk. There was one dominant or positive branch; there was one sub-dominant, or negative branch; there was a third branch, which metaphysically could be called the child. So not only was there the trinity of God, man and nature, but the trinity of father, mother and child, and the trinity corresponding to the Trimurti of the Hindus and the God-expression in Christianity.

Ichibana is not merely a form of self-expression as in painting, but a harmony of expression. God made the earth, but the earth is also God. So man arranges the plant and its flowers, but he does not bend it to his will, he harmonizes will, because there is only one will in the plant and in himself, the allpervading divine life, or the universal Buddha-nature. So in handling a plant, the feeling of the fingers is all important: there was to be no terse bending of branch, or no more than delicate handling of leaf and flower. In recent times Sir Jagadish Bose has demonstrated that plants feel pleasure and pain, but the master of flower arrangement must know this. Besides the plant is a living, growing thing and what appears pleasant today, may become ugly tomorrow.

So the cult of imperfection in beauty also appears in Ichibana. It is not that at the moment the artist expresses that which appears most beautiful to him, so much that as in the life of the plant a maximum of beauty is expressed. This may never appear at one time, it may never appear at all, but there is a tendency, in the world of feeling, if not in the world of form, toward that expression.

Now it has been held that God is destruction as well as creation; He is Siva as well as Brahma, but being God He is the All Perfect, the All Beautiful. Consequently that living beauty which is centered around the growing plant is only one aspect of flower arrangement. The Japanese have had their Ichibana; the Americans in their turn offer a flower arrangement, as against the plant arrangement.

The creative or constructive or anabolic process may be regarded as positive, or masculine; the opposite assimilative or destructive or catabolic process may be regarded as negative, or feminine. And this distinction becomes all important in the science and art of flower arrangement. For in dealing with the growing plant, the axis of activity is the stalk or stem or trunk, the straight line, the symbol of masculinity; and in handling the cut flowers, we have the curve, the sphere, the symbol of femininity. Besides this, the stalk or trunk impresses itself upon delicate fingers as to its strength, but the feeling of handling flowers is still more delicate.

Here it should be said that handling flowers is not putting them into a bowl, even when the arrangement is pleasant to the eye. Such an art is an art of the self, where the life of the flower is regarded as nonexistent. Besides we have two forms of flower arrangement at least—the one in the garden or flower box or jar where the flower is attached to the living plant, and the other where we arrange groups of cut flowers. There is a third, intermediate form sometimes met with at art shows.

The first principle, then, we should bear in mind in handling the flower is that it is alive, and that a maximum of esthetic enjoyment comes in regarding the flowers as living. So while color,

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form and size are important, sensitivity of the fingers in handling flowers is just as important as in Ichibana.

Place a few sensitive people in an unfamiliar or hostile mob and either they become ill or their worse qualities come to the fore. Likewise sensitive flowers, if placed in unfavorable surroundings, will react unfavorably. The artist, whose forte is flower arrangement, therefore uses the same tenderness, the same delicacy, the same sensitivity in arranging cut blooms as in shaping his stalks in Ichibana. He is not a florist, he is not a window-trimmer he is not an exhibitionist; he is an artist of living forms.

Of course color, shape and size are very important also, but the principles to be applied here are not essentially different from those inherent in painting and in such a plastic art as the manufacture of artificial flowers. But as the feeling in the fingers and in the heart grows, the hands will sense the right proportions and right placing of stalk and stem, of leaf and flower, the heart will promise the right relation of colors, and the esthetic expression will ultimately produce a maximum of enjoyment.