Chapter 1

Aesthetics in Japan

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Published 2026, last updated 2026-05-19

Please cite this work as

APA
Haimes, P. (2026). *Exploring Japanese Design*. https://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/ haimes/japanesedesign/

Chicago (Notes & Bibliography)
Haimes, Paul. *Exploring Japanese Design*. Self-published, 2026. https://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/ haimes/japanesedesign/

MLA
Haimes, Paul. *Exploring Japanese Design*. Self-published, 2026, https://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/ haimes/japanesedesign/

This chapter discusses aesthetic concepts often associated with Japanese design. First, a brief discussion about the concept of Japanese minimalism is presented, situating it within broader conversations about art and design in Japan. This discussion also underscores a relevant point about Japanese aesthetics: that, unlike previous Western discourses on aesthetics, Japanese aesthetic values are present not just in what might be considered "high art," but also in the everyday objects and practices that one regularly encounters – bowls, teacups, flowers, seasonal celebrations, and so on. In this sense, aesthetic life in Japan is not viewed as a luxury or as something confined to specific cultural contexts, but as a sensibility embedded within everyday experience. This discussion is followed by an overview of a handful of Japanese aesthetic terms relevant to discussions of Japanese design. For each of these key terms, a brief discussion of their origin is provided, along with examples of where the aesthetic emerges. While often associated with simplicity and restraint, these concepts also encompass more elaborate and expressive forms. As a whole, they show the diversity of approaches within Japanese aesthetics and their significance in both artistic contexts and everyday encounters.

1 Minimalism

Contemporary Japanese design, like many of Japan's great artistic traditions, is often described as minimalist. Although modernist design in several countries - particularly in Europe, including Sweden and Germany - adopted a minimalist approach from the mid-twentieth century onward, I have previously highlighted that Japanese minimalism is rooted in "underlying ideas from Japanese Zen Buddhism that drive a seemingly intuitive preference towards minimalist forms, a preference evident in traditional artifacts and also in contemporary art and design."[1]

Furthermore, while Japanese minimalism is often expressed in modernist or contemporary design, minimalist forms can be observed in Japanese artworks, craft, and architecture long before the modern and contemporary eras.

Although minimalism is an observable trend in much Japanese art and design, as we will see throughout this book, not all Japanese design can be simply characterized as minimalist. Numerous examples feature elaborate patterns and vivid colours, and some appear densely composed. Nevertheless, minimalism remains a recurring theme in contemporary Japanese design, evident in logos, household products, and architecture. A minimalist design invites us to engage with its form deeply. As Sōetsu Yanagi (1889-1961), the philosopher who founded the Japanese *Mingei* (folk crafts) movement, stated:

> Before we begin to express our thoughts, we first have to listen to what the object has to say. In our appreciation and awareness of beauty, we must first of all rein in our tongue.[2]

More recently, graphic designer Kenya Hara (Born 1958) claimed that in Japanese design aesthetics "simplicity is a concept to be understood in opposition to complexity, redundancy, and excess."[3] Many of the aesthetic concepts below further elaborate on this shying away from excess and complexity, though some concepts present an exception to this tendency.

Prior to exploring specific concepts, though, it is important to note the role that Japanese aesthetics play. As Saito points out, aesthetic values in Japan are not confined to the kind of works one might encounter in an art gallery but are essential to the objects we interact with in everyday life:

> While there are distinct art media in the Japanese aesthetic tradition, including those familiar to the West, such as painting, sculpture, literature, music, and theatre, as well as more unique ones like flower arrangement and tea ceremony, there is a prevailing aesthetic sensibility that permeates everyday objects and activities

[1] Paul Haimes. "On Japanese Minimalism." In: *Contemporary Aesthetics* 18 (2020). Accessed: 2026-04-28. URL: https://contempaesthetics.org/2020/09/24/on-japanese-minimalism/.

[2] Soetsu Yanagi. *The Beauty of Everyday Things*. Trans. by Michael Brase. Penguin UK, 2018, 282.

[3] Kenya Hara. *Designing Design*. Lars Müller Publishers, 2018, 42.

Figure 1: A ceramic teacup, referred to as *yunomi*. Traditional arts and crafts, as well as modern and contemporary design, exhibit minimalist qualities in Japan.

> such as cooking, packaging, and seasonal celebration. I regard those everyday objects and phenomena to embody Japanese aesthetic sensibility most eloquently, which in turn sharpens people's aesthetic sensibility and nurtures aesthetic appreciation of the mundane.[4]

This framing from Saito highlights that aspects of Japanese aesthetics are not just abstract ideals but sensibilities embedded in both material culture and everyday experience. A handful of these more prominent ideas – *ma*, *yūgen*, *wabi-sabi*, *mono no aware*, *shibusa*, and *iki* – are explored below. This is not to suggest that these are the only notable aesthetic concepts in Japan, but they are particularly useful in analyzing traits observable in modern and contemporary Japanese design.

2 Ma

The first of these is *Ma*, a concept often translated as "space," "gap," or "negative space." *Ma* is not simply emptiness but the interval that gives form and meaning to what surrounds it. I have suggested that it "implies an interval between elements in design, such as those in rock garden landscapes (karesansui)."[5] Isozaki captured this sensibility vividly:

> 'Perceive–Blankness,' 'Voice–Silence,' 'Void–Fill;' employing pairs of contrasting concepts, [he] tried to juxtapose the negative and the positive. This is not an obliteration of the negative by the positive; on the contrary, it not only admits the existence of the negative space, but it also 'fills into' the positive without turning the

[4] Yuriko Saito. *Everyday Aesthetics*. Oxford University Press, 2007, 3–4.

[5] Haimes, see n. 1.

negative into the positive.[6]

Figure 2: The zen rock garden (*karesansui*) at Ryōanji temple in Kyoto. Such landscapes are said to evoke the aesthetic quality of *ma*.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy expands on this by noting that *Ma* "is not so much an absence as a presence, the silence between sounds that makes rhythm possible."[7] Saito also underlines its everyday relevance: the spacing of paving stones in a garden path or the pauses in a conversation require active perception, reminding us that emptiness can be as structured and meaningful as presence.[8] This aesthetic sense is often expressed when describing artwork through the phrase *yohaku no bi*, meaning "the beauty of blank space", particularly in arts such as *sumi* ink painting and calligraphy.[9]

3 Yūgen

Yūgen is a central Japanese aesthetic ideal, particularly in *Nō* theatre, as articulated by the *Nō* actor and playwright Zeami (1363-1443). It refers to a profound, ineffable beauty – suggestive, mysterious, and deep, rather than overt or explicit. Zeami describes it through images such as

[6]Takahiko Iimura. *Between Two Worlds: Intermedia and Expanded Cinema*. Taka Iimura, 2002, 45.

[7]Michele Marra. "Japanese Aesthetics." In: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. by Edward N. Zalta. Fall 2020 Edition. 2020. URL: `https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/japanese-aesthetics/`.

[8]Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, see n. 4.

[9]Tadanori Kasashima, Nobuyuki Kayano, and Arata Shimao. *Yohakuron: Shoga bi e no shotai [Invitation to Calligraphy & Painting: On Negative Space]*. Ed. by S. Kiryu and T. Shiomi. Gijutsugakusha, 2022.

"a lonely snowless peak among many snow-clad mountain tops" or "a silver bowl filled with snow."[10] This first example is a common theme in Japanese visual arts – *sumi* ink painting, especially (Figure 3). Shinkei offers examples like "the glimpse of the moon through clouds" or "a single white blossom amidst bamboo."[11] *Yūgen* values subtlety, implication, and depth of feeling, often conveyed through minimalism, mystery and understatement. In poetry, theatre, and the visual arts, it emphasizes suggestion over direct expression, evoking emotions beyond words.

Figure 3: A *sumi* ink painting depicting Mount Fuji. Such landscape artwork is said to evoke the aesthetic ideal of *yūgen*. Japanese ink painting also demonstrates ample use of white space.

4 Wabi-Sabi

Wabi-Sabi embraces incompleteness, impermanence, and rustic simplicity. It arose in the sixteenth century as a reaction against the ostentatiousness of Chinese-inspired art forms, and is an aesthetic closely associated with the tea ceremony, especially (Figure 4). As I have noted previously, it "is derived from Zen Buddhist thinking as a focus on simplicity and an acceptance of imperfection."[12]

It is worth considering the origins of this term, and the art forms that it has been applied to. As Saito notes, it is "derived both from sabishi (loneliness) and sabi (rust), sabi refers to the austere, stark, and rustic atmosphere conjured up primarily in haiku, but also in other liter-

[10]Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, see n. 4.

[11]Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, see n. 4.

[12]Haimes, see n. 1.

Figure 4: The tea-house of Takatora Tōdō, a high-ranking military commander from the early Edō period, first built around 350 years ago. The tea house is now situated within the grounds of Ueno Zoo in Tokyo.

ary expressions, the tea ceremony, and Nō theater. Because of its association with rust, it also refers to agedness."[13] In other words, *wabi* connotes austerity and rusticity, while *sabi* refers to weathering, solitude, and the patina of age.

Landscape imagery also appears in the definition of *wabi* given by tea masters. Takeno Jōō (1502-1555), for example, cites the following poem by Fujiwara no Teika (1162-1241) to illustrate *wabi* :

> Looking about / Neither flowers / Nor scarlet leaves, / A bayside reed hovel / In the autumn dusk.[14]

The aesthetic is perhaps best expressed by Kenkō in his *Tsurezuregusa* (Essays in Idleness): "Are we to look at cherry blossoms only in full bloom, at the moon only when it is cloudless? ... Branches about to blossom or gardens strewn with faded flowers are worthier of our admiration."[15] In embracing what is unfinished or in decline, *wabi-sabi* offers a counterpoint to contemporary ideals of perfection and consumer culture. Saito extends this observation to everyday life, showing how ordinary objects—a chipped teacup (*chawan*) or a weathered wooden fence—can embody the *wabi-sabi* ideal of imperfection.[16] This focus on impermanence and incompleteness resonates strongly with another Japanese aesthetic sensibility: *mono no aware*.

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[13]Yuriko Saito. "Japanese Aesthetics." In: *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*. Ed. by Michael Kelly. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2014.

[14]Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, see n. 4.

[15]Yoshida Kenko. *Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenko*. Trans. by Donald Keene. Columbia University Press, 1967, 33.

[16]Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, see n. 4.

5 Mono no aware

Mono no aware is often translated as "the pathos of things" or "empathy toward things." It describes an emotional awareness of the fragility of life and the fleetingness of beauty. Davies and Ikeno contrast this with Western traditions, where beauty is treated as a more objective or logical category: "aware is a concept based on the feelings of Japanese people."[17]

The poignancy of *aware* lies precisely in its transience: "Though fragile, this kind of beauty creates a powerful experience for the observer, since it must be fully enjoyed in a specific period of time."[18]

Horst Hammitzsch has even suggested that "wabi-sabi is the end result of mono no aware."[19] Donald Richie describes the feeling as: "A 'sympathetic sadness' caused by contemplation of this world ... a gentle pleasure found in mundane pursuits soon to vanish, a content created in the knowledge that one is with the world and that leaving it is, after all, in the natural state of things."[20] Similarly, Makoto Ueda characterizes *mono no aware* as: "A deep, empathetic appreciation of the ephemeral beauty manifest in nature and human life, and therefore usually tinged with a hint of sadness, [though] under certain circumstances it can be accompanied by admiration, awe, or even joy."[21]

This sense of ephemeral beauty is often illustrated through the example of cherry blossoms, which are in full bloom for only a short period each year (Figure 5). The philosopher Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) further explains that "to recognize their beauty and to be moved by feeling that they are deeply beautiful is to know mono no aware."[22] Impermanence was a notable feature of Japanese aesthetics highlighted in the writings of British author Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), known for introducing Japanese culture to the English-speaking world in the late nineteenth century, writing about its culture, folklore, and daily life:

> Generally speaking, we [in the West] construct for endurance, the Japanese for impermanency. Few things for common use are made in Japan with a view to durability. The straw sandals worn out and replaced at each stage of a journey, the robe consisting of a few simple widths loosely stitched together for wearing, and unstitched again for washing, the fresh chopsticks served to each new guest

[17] Roger J. Davies and Osamu Ikeno. *The Japanese Mind: Understanding Contemporary Japanese Culture*. Tuttle Publishing, 2011, 12.

[18] Davies and Ikeno, see n. 17, 15.

[19] Horst Hammitzsch. *Zen in the Art of the Tea Ceremony*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, 54.

[20] Donald Richie. *A Tractate on Japanese Aesthetics*. Stone Bridge Press, 2005, 48.

[21] Makoto Ueda. *Literary and Art Theories in Japan*. University of Michigan Press, 1967, 45.

[22] Yuriko Saito. "The Japanese Appreciation of Nature." In: *British Journal of Aesthetics* 25.3 (1985), pp. 239–251.

Figure 5: The aesthetic concept of *mono no aware* is said to be illustrated through the cherry blossoms (*sakura*), which only bloom for a short period each year.

> at a hotel, the light shoji frames serving at once for windows and walls, and repapered twice a year; the mattings renewed every autumn, – all these are but random examples of countless small things in daily life that illustrate the national contentment with impermanency.[23]

Although closely related, *mono no aware* has not garnered the same level of attention in the West as *wabi-sabi*. Nevertheless, given their interconnection and emphasis on impermanence, discussion of one often entails reference to the other, and it is possible that interest in *mono no aware* will gradually increase outside Japan.

6 Shibusa

Shibusa, or *shibumi*, is an aesthetic of subdued elegance and quiet taste. It resists ostentation, favouring moderation and refinement. It is, as Yanagi notes, a timeless aesthetic that never bends to the latest trends and fads.[24] I have described it as follows: "A sense of subtle elegance is captured in the Japanese word shibui (adjective) or shibumi (noun), terms usually translated as elegant, austere, refined, and simple, but also bitter and astringent."[25]

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* classifies *shibusa* as "austere elegance,"[26] noting its kinship with *sabi's* "elegant simplicity." Whereas *mono no aware* evokes emotional intensity,

[23]Lafcadio Hearn. *Kokoro: Hints and Echoes of Japanese Inner Life*. English. Dover Publications, 2012, 8.

[24]Yanagi, see n. 2.

[25]Haimes, see n. 1.

[26]Marra, see n. 7.

shibusa cultivates a more restrained sensitivity – a refinement that appreciates quiet subtleties and deepens with time. This is an aesthetic that relates, partially, to wabi-sabi: "Shibumi may be an expression of the sabi part of wabi-sabi, which can imply a simple elegance but without the connotations of rust or antiquity that sabi can otherwise suggest."[27] Furthermore, though some might consider the aesthetic of shibusa to be of the past, I have argued that it also applies to the present, and therefore is relevant to contemporary design. Consider, for example, how Donald Richie described the aesethetic as being one of "the use of subdued colors, simple patterns, singers with unostentatious deliveries, actors who blended with the ensemble."[28] Might something like the products of Muji (Figure 6) also count as examples of shibusa?

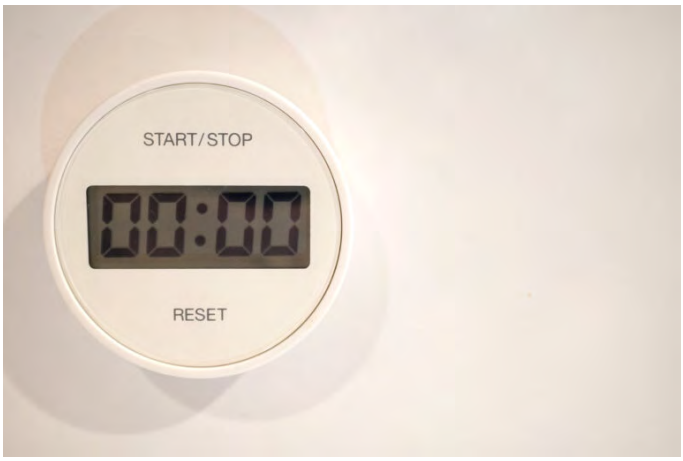

Figure 6: MUJI kitchen timer, designed by Hiroshi Seki and Yohei Kuwano. I have argued that such modern and contemporary design can exhibit qualities of *shibusa*.

7 Iki

While *shibusa* suggests restraint, *iki* is an aesthetic of chic stylishness, closely tied to the urban culture of Edō-period Japan. It was particularly associated with the merchant classes (*chōnin*) and with the pleasures of the city. The vibrant culture and flamboyance of pleasure quarters (*ukiyo*) during the Edō period, captured so poignantly, and most famously, in the woodblock prints of Hokusai (1760-1849), Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858), and Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806) (Figure 7), demonstrates that Japanese design has always encompassed both simplicity and flourishes, or both subtlety and style. It is easy to visualize this aesthetic in the colourful kimono styles that persist to this day, or even in the buzzing nightlife found in several districts of contemporary Tokyo or Osaka.

As I have explained regarding the relation between *shibusa* and *iki*: *Iki* is often used to

[27] Haimes, see n. 1.

[28] Richie, see n. 20, 40–1.

Figure 7: The painting *Three Beauties of the Present Day* (*Tōji San Bijin*) from Kitagawa Utamaro. Kitagawa was one of several woodblock artists who captured the vibrancy of the Edō period.

suggest something analogous to chic, stylish or elegant. While some objects may exhibit qualities of both *iki* and *shibumi*, the latter implies something more subtle and humble, and not necessarily fashionable or stylish.[29]

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy identifies three core aspects of *iki*: composure (*ikiji*), coquetry (*bitai*), and resignation (*akirame*),[30] the latter of which suggests that its beauty may be, like that in mono no aware, only fleeting.

Saito describes how Shūzō Kuki (1888-1941), an art critic and philosopher who wrote the seminal 1930 work *The Structure of Iki*, "saw a typical manifestation of *iki* in the resolute and proud, but at the same time restrained and gentle, behaviour of the yūjo (literally: 'play-woman')."[31] This scenario suggests a worldly sensibility – stylish and playful, but perhaps shaded by an acceptance of impermanence. *Iki* therefore contrasts with the quiet dignity of *shibusa*, offering a more urban, fashionable – even colourful and playful, expression of taste. Here, we see that Japanese aesthetics are not reducible to a single formula of necessarily relying on minimalism or restraint.

[29]Haimes, see n. 1.

[30]Marra, see n. 7.

[31]Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, see n. 4.

8 Summary

The concepts introduced here show how Japanese aesthetics cultivate sensitivity to impermanence, subtlety, and restraint. Yet they also demonstrate a breadth that includes other qualities such as vibrancy, colour, and style. Furthermore, Japanese aesthetics are not confined to art objects or high culture but are embedded in daily practices, materials, and our perceptions of them. As Saito has argued, aesthetic life "is neither [a] dispensable luxury nor inconsequential triviality."[32] Many everyday experiences in Japan, such as appreciating the weathered surface of a teacup (chawan) or the fleeting charm of cherry blossoms (*sakura*), are imbued with aesthetic qualities that are often subtle, understated, and impermanent. On the other hand, the vibrancy of some kimono textiles, for example, shows us a different side of Japanese aesthetics. In either direction, we are reminded that such refinement of taste is not an occasional luxury but a persistent reality of everyday life, if we take the time to pause and appreciate it.

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[32] Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, see n. 4, 8.

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