

The Beauty beyond Speech

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Abstract

The reason for an object to be created is to serve the daily necessities of human life.

Humans can be divided into two simple categories: the mental and the physical. An object, therefore, can not only satisfy the needs of the mental or the physical, but to meet both needs simultaneously for it to be considered as an intact object. In short, it needs to be aesthetically pleasing as well as fulfilling its functionality.

The aesthetic appearance affects a large portion of the psychology. An object that delights people must have an element of “beauty.” The West and the East have their own particular definitions on aesthetics, and they are quite different. This paper attempts to explore how the East frames the image of beauty by looking into this topic from three different schools of thoughts: Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. The paper hopes ceramic practitioners and enthusiasts can stand on the shoulders of the giants to create new history and culture.

We live in a society where the industry and information are developing at a rapid pace, and the making of most objects are being replaced by technologies. Craftsmen spare no efforts in pursuing the state of perfection by working and learning endlessly to have their works to be seen. The idea to possess miraculous skills as method to pursue a career as a craftsman was what I used to believe in. It was not until an accident that partially impaired of my vision that I began to see things differently. In spite the unfortunate incident, I lost the ability to make exquisite and delicate craft, I was able to "see" things more distinctly. As I slow down the pace of my life and view beauty more objectively and carefully, I realized that beauty exists not only within the finite skills of craftsmanship, but how the greater beauty exists beyond men and skills. It is not easy to perceive the greater beauty when our minds are not at ease, and when we stick to our existing perceptions, True beauty is hard to articulate with precise words.

Laozi once said, "If the whole world all agrees that the same thing is beautiful, it will no longer be beautiful."

The culture that nurtured us shapes our perceptions toward beauty. Due to the contrasting history, culture and religion of the East and the West, the two have viewed beauty very differently since ancient times. Western civilization focuses on people, believing the power of people, and human wisdom can prevail over nature. While the East believes that man is an integral part of nature and learns from nature. In a traditional sense, the Western culture pursues things that are eternal, such as the glorious diamond, ruby, and sapphire, whereas the Chinese adores the mild and smooth jade stones; this shows a dramatic contrast between the West and the East. When a jade stone is worn for a long period of time, the surface will create a warm and harmonious sheen. In the past, the Chinese draws a parallel between the jade stone and a gentleman. The object and self to be united as one is the foundation of traditional aesthetics of the East. The functional relationship between men and objects no longer exists, and the two begins to bind, as a result this allows objects to develop a spiritual essence and create their own personalities. Beauty is generated through the interaction between the object, time, and person.



Fig.1. Cultural differences between the East and the West results in different perspectives toward beauty

The industrial civilizations brought exceptional manufacturing efficiency and continuous cost downs, that eventually flooded our daily lives with mass produced products. When everything is made standardized, durable and unchanged for all eternity, it is hard for us to have emotional exchanges with the things we own. Nowadays, we take in huge amount of cheap information and ugly visual stimulants, which let the senses of sight and touch become monotonous and dull. All the imagination and romantic elements of things are replaced by standard, in which we have also lost the quietness and the acute ability to observe. Over emphasizing skill is an attempt to pursue the texture and the refinement of a soulless machine, in the end, the artwork itself loses its soul. Skill is essential, but for one to rise to the state of art, one has to leave behind the restrictions of skill to a certain extent and realize that skill is only the mean but not the end. The highest state of Tai Chi, for example, is to leave all the moves behind. It is the same for a skilled craftsman whose creation must look so effortless and has no trace of rigidity and force. Under such circumstances, the irregularity and imperfection of the work becomes precious.

The root of traditional Chinese aesthetics is influenced by the Taoist and Zen Buddhist, especially the aesthetic concept that "Tao follows the laws of Nature." When we overly emphasis the skills to create art, we lose the element of "trueness" and often than not, "trueness" is shown in the most plain and simple way. When we are too consumed with the details of a work, we tend to neglect the beauty within the work itself. Sometimes the simpler a work is, the more it highlights and expresses profound emotions. A good work fully utilizes materials. The work of a craftsman bestows a shape upon the material, the origin of its beauty is where the work naturally shows itself. The technology of chromatic photography has existed for more than 60 years. But until this day, there are still a lot of great photographers who choose to work with black-and-white photography. This is because black-and-white photographs are more indulgent, pure, simple, and highlights the

work itself. It eliminates the colors that disturb our senses and thinking, which allows us to focus on the theme, and pay attention to the details that we would have taken for granted due to familiarity. The brightness, darkness, lines, and texture of the black-and-white photos might be the most valuable part of the work. This is the beauty which Laozi meant by saying "the most skillful may seem clumsy."



Fig. 2. After eliminating the colors in the photo, the theme of the work is more focused

Strictly speaking, even after a piece of work is created by a craftsman and is distributed to users or collectors, it is still an unfinished piece. The appearance of the work will change due to long-term usage. This process creates a phenomenon, which allows the user to intervene with the practice. The longer one uses an object, the more time and emotion one invests into it. When the object is used, it recalls one's memory of the scenarios and emotions it once had. As the object is enriched by vivid memories, it transcends its physical form and expands indefinitely. For example, a ceramic teapot with tea stains or a scratched and chipped surface, all indicates a relationship that has established between the object and its owner. The object reminds the owner of the bitter or sweet memories from the past. Therefore this object has surpassed its existence of being an object, and established a spiritual/emotional connection with the user. By intertwining time and art together, the greater beauty emerges.



Fig. 3. An object as a vehicle that carries the memories of the owner, and grows along with the owner

The Taoist philosophy includes the complement of true and false, the consistency of the yin and the yang, dependency of life and death, the parallel of stillness and motion; these philosophies all explore the harmony between things, as well as the harmony between human and thing. It also means that when you take your stance, you won't affect other people, which then tolerance is needed. It is only by being kind and humble to others who are different from you, can you obtain peace. If we apply this idea to the perception of art, a piece of work that you may be obsessed with must have an element of humbleness. The humbleness here can be symbolized through leaving blankness or deficiency on the work. The incompleteness of this world leaves us with the opportunity to complete the work with our emotion or ideas. The blank space in traditional Chinese paintings or defects on potteries all provides us with more room for imagination. Although these incomplete/faulty features of the works manifest the concept of "false" in traditional Chinese philosophy, they actually intensify the element of "true" through comparison. This allows the work to become more complete and diverse. The viewer or the owner will connect with the work instantly each time they admire it, as a result the work will linger in the depths of our soul and achieve perfection that is beyond our reach. On the contrary, a piece of work that boasts proudness and perfection cannot connect with people. If the appearance of an object leaves no room for imagination, it must look dull. Next time when you visit the National Palace Museum, keep an eye for the national porcelain treasures from the Song Dynasty, you will find that these highly valued works almost all have defects, such as crazing or pinholes. The crab claws-like cracked glaze that can be found on Ru ware, Guan ware, and Jun ware are defects in pottery, but it is also where the beauty lies.

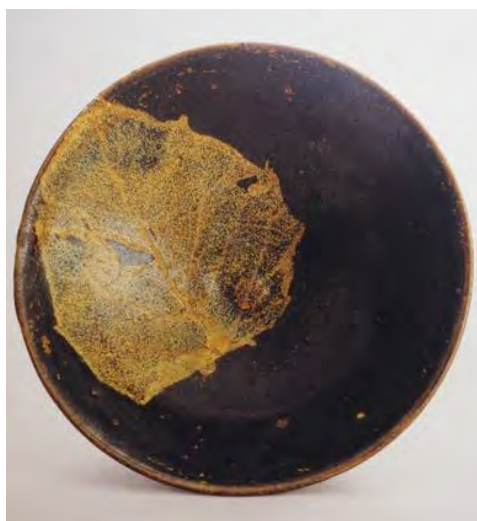


Fig. 4. Example of the complement of true and false

Due to time and interaction with users, every piece of artwork is unfinished, therefore, the work will continuously change. Nothing will remain the same as time goes by. Buddhism believes that nothing in the world is eternal and unchanged, for all things will eventually come to an end, and the only difference is the matter of time. Every second of birth is followed by the next second of death. Our life shuttles between life and death, therefore we should treasure each other when we can, and let go of our feelings when we separate.



Fig. 5. Time has washed away the semblance of the Cochin ceramics, and made it look more calm and refined

A utensil is like a person, it ages and decays due to many reasons, and it is also able to rejuvenate for many other reasons. Time is an abstract existence, but if one can spot the trace of time on one utensil, the utensil then becomes alive, just like an old man who has experienced the hardship of life, who no longer has youth and beauty, yet he shows off another type of beauty that is more rich and profound. The disappearance of time allows imagination to grow, and different people will have different imaginations. The difference of time and space will also affect one's admiration towards the same piece of artwork. It is through such imagination that we get a peek into beauty. As we turn older and wiser, we will gradually grow on to the changes and traces of an object, to an extent that even a broken object that is restored will win over our hearts. Doesn't this reflect the fickleness of the real world? The aesthetics of the East is often related to how things evolve and change through time. Unique Eastern ceramic mending techniques, such as the Kintsugi, have become very popular in recent years. I believe this has also to do with this idea, which actually grants a higher value to the work than it originally had. As long as the defects of the utensil don't affect its function, the defects can become the highlight of the work. This is the secret to keeping the work exciting. The traces of mending show the imperfect reality and provide warmth to our monotonous and depressing life. It reminds us that if we choose to think from a different perspective, we can

detach ourselves from the bitterness and pain in life, and let go of our obsessions.



Fig. 6. Every second of birth is followed by the next second of death

All people and things are not perfect. Imperfection displays humanity; it is only through imperfection that true beauty reveals. Once we realize the inexpressible beauty of simplicity, imperfection and the beauty created by time, we are free of the restraints of space and time, and are able to experience our life and the greater beauty from a macroscopic view.

Lastly, I would like to share a phrase from the Diamond Sutra, "We should develop a mind which does not abide in anything." "Abide" here means to have attachment to something, as "mind" means a quiet and peaceful state of being. We as human beings have become attached to things due to the long term interaction between the people and their consciousness. This is especially true when we are always busy capturing all sorts of knowledge and information every day. As a craftsperson, especially in the area of craft, I see friends who have become obsessed with research and fail to see the greater picture. I used to be one of them, yet I was fortunate to obtain a new perspective after a series of incidents. The scale of the world is decided by our mind's intent. If we leave behind our preconceived concepts, such as the persistence of exquisite technique, the knowledge or even taste, we will find a new possibility that awaits your exploration. The more difficult you find the rules to be broken, the more surprising the treasures are hidden behind these rules. Leaving behind your obsessions allows you to develop more ideas and concepts. And if you abide to nothing, you can achieve anything.