

Art and the Sense of Smell: The Traditional Japanese Art of Scents (ko)

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Abstract

Aesthetics is closely related to the five senses – sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. We experience art through our senses. Why is the sense of smell so little involved in our perception of art?

There is an art form in Japan called 'incense ceremony' (Kodo), developed to appreciate incenses which were imported into Japan from South-East Asia and India.

The ceremonial appreciation of incenses concentrates around the sense of smell. Kodo – being widely considered one of the traditional Japanese arts – definitely deserves the attention of aestheticians. The fact that the expression "listening to the incense" is used more frequently than "smelling the incense " shows clearly that the range of aesthetic stimuli exceeds the capabilities of the sense of smell alone. Through the aroma of incense we can experience senses other than smell alone.

After presenting a short introduction to Kodo, I would like to ask the participants of this conference what possibilities fragrances have in different fields of art. In the age of technology, the art of smell may open up new fields, new art forms.

INTRODUCTION

Of the five senses, it seems that throughout the world the sense of smell has been used merely in a practical way and not for the sake of pleasure. Why is the sense of smell so divorced from our perception of art? In Japan, there has long been a unique form of art related to fragrances called kodo(1) . Kodo was developed as a traditional art like the tea ceremony, flower arrangement, and calligraphy. The purpose of this essay is to examine the relation between the arts and the sense of smell through an analysis of the traditional art of fragrances in Japan. Finally, I would like to refer not only to the sense of smell but also to all of the five senses and their relation to the arts.

Briefly, the paper is structured as follows: First, I would like to introduce the history of ko and kodo in Japan. In the process, I will explain some of the art's interesting characteristics. Second, the reader will be able to understand more clearly the relation between art and the sense of smell. Lastly, I would like to deal with some of the philosophical considerations of this relationship.

1. THE HISTORY OF INCENSE, OR KO, AND THE BIRTH OF KODO IN JAPAN

In Japan, the use of incense (ko) has a long history, and the ceremonial appreciation of ko gave rise to kodo ("the way of incense"). In this section, I would like to introduce the history of ko and kodo. From this, a clearer understanding of the relation between art and the sense of smell will be explored in the second section.

We cannot stress enough that incense (for example, jinko, an aromatic aloewood, the name of which literally means "sinking-in-water" incense) cannot have been grown in Japan, and that all incense was originally imported from South-East Asia and India(2) . It is also important to remember that the high cost of incense prevented all but the very wealthy from buying it. As a result, incense was closely connected with people in power.

The oldest recorded use of incense in Japan appears in A.D. 595 in the Nihonshoki (Chronicles of Japan). In the text, light aloe wood is reported to have drifted ashore on the island of Awaji. Since that time, incense was used as an indispensable part of Buddhist ceremony. Incense was burnt as an offering to the Buddha and in order to purify a ritual site. As in other countries, incense was first used in a religious way in Japan, too.

Later, two unique uses of incense were developed. First, there was neriko, a blended incense. It was developed by courtiers in the Heian Period (794-1192) and modeled on the Chinese use of incense. Second, the art of kodo was developed. At the end of the Kamakura Period (1192-1333), when the government was taken over by military rulers, incense wood itself was burned as well as blended. From these beginnings, a new way of appreciating incense was developed in later centuries and led to the ceremonial appreciation of incense. I would like to offer an outline of this process.

In *The Tale of Genji* , written by Murasaki Shikibu in the 11th century and often said to be the world's first novel, neriko is often mentioned(3) . Neriko is a blended incense ball made from various powdered ingredients (sometimes over twenty ingredients) and honey, and is kneaded into a ball(4) . Neriko has its origins in the original incense recipes brought to Japan from China by the priest Ganjin. The Chinese had already been using incense for pleasure and medical purposes apart from using it in religious ceremony. During this period, the Chinese influence on the lives of the Japanese aristocracy was profound. For Japanese courtiers the Chinese way of using incense was so exciting that they began to introduce new recipes in competition with each other. They improved on the Chinese recipes in their own way, and compared their original concoctions in incense contests. In these contests and games they enjoyed incense as a way of sharpening their sense of smell, and, in time this appreciation of incense developed into the art of incense, kodo.

After the military government came into power early in the 13th century A.D., the way of appreciating incense began to change. Instead of using blended incenses such as neriko, people burnt the incense wood (especially

jinko) itself. They also competed for the most excellent jinko (called toko) , and this set the stage for the establishment of kodo.

The establishment of kodo dates back to the age of the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa in the mid-15th century. Yoshimasa was interested in all the arts of the period, including the tea ceremony, flower arrangement, and noh drama, all of which emerged at roughly the same time as kodo and influenced each other. Yoshimasa played an important role in the development of these arts. He ordered Shino Soshin , the chief military advisor of the shogun , to evaluate and classify all of the incense that was being used. Soshin classified an enormous number of kinds of incense by their fragrance and the area in which they were produced. With the help of Sanjonishi Sanetaka, a noted scholar, poet and government minister, Soshin organized and set up rules to appreciate ko as an art form at formal gatherings (unlike the informal appreciation of the Heian Period). Soshin and Sanetaka are now regarded as the masters of the two schools of kodo.

When the incense was classified, it was named by the emperors, leaders of kodo and other prominent figures. Because ko was a valuable and expensive commodity, those whose names were used regarded the incense as a family treasure. These names were also often rooted in Japanese poetry and literature. For example, Emperor Gomizuno gave the three kinds of incense from the jinko tree the names "White Chrysanthemum," "Cuckoo Singing," and "Boat of Firewood (Shiba-hune)" Each of them took its origin from a traditional Japanese poem. In other cases, incense names were borrowed from The Tale of Genji and The Tale of Ise, which contains tales and poems as well as descriptions of famous Japanese sights. In other words, it was necessary to borrow profound elements from other Japanese arts when people practiced kodo. This also led them to strive further in the Japanese poem, tea ceremony, flower arrangement and calligraphy.

After the establishment of kodo, ko was popularized. But it was not until the Edo Period (1603-1867) that ko was enjoyed by common people. At that time, the capital was moved by the Tokugawa regime from Kyoto to Edo (present-day Tokyo), and the bearers of culture shifted from the men patronized by the Ashikaga shogun in the 15th century to the Tokugawa elite (daimyo, samurai retainers, etc.) and the newly- emerging, urban merchant class. Also for aristocratic women, such as shogun daughters, the knowledge of kodo along with Japanese poetry and calligraphy was an essential part of their cultural background.

Because of the flourishing popularity of kodo, many of the incense games in kodo that are played now were created in the Edo Period. Kumiko is a form of intellectual diversion involving the appreciation of incense. It is not only the enjoyment of incense, but also incorporates images taken from a certain Japanese tale, seasonal events, and special occasions. There are a lot of kumiko every season and for every occasion. (I have included a summary of one of them in the summary of this paper.)(6)(7)(8)(9)(10).

A decline in the popularity of kodo began after its peak in the middle of the Edo Period. The reasons are thought to be several. Kodo began to be regarded as not being suitable to modern life, because it required a lot

of time and money. In addition, the Japanese are no longer interested in incense, but rather enjoy the fragrances of perfume from foreign countries and, later, aromatherapy instead. Most Japanese today scarcely know about ko and kodo.

2. A CONSIDERATION OF THE SENSE OF SMELL THROUGH KO AND KODO

Aesthetics is closely related to the five senses. We experience art through our senses. But of the five senses, only smell is difficult to connect with the arts, except in the case of ko and kodo. The varieties and uses of incense in Japan are so unique that we are able to produce characteristics related to the sense of smell with ko and kodo. The ceremonial appreciation of incenses, such as kodo, focuses on the sense of smell.

In general, the characteristics of the sense of smell are as follows: First, a fragrance spreads and then it fades away at once. Therefore, it cannot be precisely defined. Second, it is easily connected with ideas of the past and the present environment. It is often the case that a specific flower makes us recall feelings related to incidents in our past, or something in the present season that we do not otherwise notice. Kodo has developed these traditional characteristics of the sense of smell. Third, there are not many linguistic expressions available to describe smell precisely. Different from the other senses, expressions related to smell are highly subjective and tend to be evaluations of a particular fragrance. In addition to these basic characteristics of the sense of smell, other characteristics may be developed from the Japanese way of expressing smell and kodo.

In Japan, there are a number of interesting ways of expressing fragrances. From the earliest times, the word "ni-ho-hu," which means "to smell" today, denoted the appearance of a shade of red that was shining; in short, "ni-ho-hu" originally expressed a visual condition. At the same time, it was used as the expression of smell. It is said that "ni-ho-hu" meant both color and smell, partly because expressions related to smell were thought to be lucky. When we consider this fact, it suggests some interesting aspects of smell. In Japan, the interest in fragrance was more developed than in other countries. But why are linguistic expressions related to it so few? The answer to this question will be suggested after a brief look at other smell-related issues in Japan.

In addition to the close relation between smell and sight, we should first consider one of the terms used in kodo: monko. It is said that the Japanese began using the phrase "listening to incense" (monko) rather than "smelling incense" around the 15th century. One reference source says that this term had its origins in "sho-kyo" from the Chronicles of China. This phrase, which also translates to "listening to incense," meant the judgment of right and wrong. Other scholars believe that the term is related to Buddhism. Buddha's teachings are incense, so Buddhists listen to Buddha's words in the form of incense, instead of smelling them.

It is unclear which explanation is true. In any case, "listening to incense" exhibits a side of smell in kodo that is both philosophical and spiritual in addition to being merely fragrant. The expression of sound sublimates

the smell into a spiritual meaning. Another interesting aspect of smell in Japan is the special classifications of ko. They were not only classified by their fragrances and the place they were produced, but also by the "taste of the smell." When ko is heated, the smoke rises. The smell of this smoke is compared to taste. There are five tastes: sweet, sour, spicy, salty, and bitter. In kodo, the smell of ko is distinguished by these five tastes, and from these we can remember the fragrance of ko in the game of kodo. But even when incense is classified by the taste of smell, both taste and smell are subjective senses, so the classifications were not decisive. Because of this, there were often differences between the schools of kodo regarding the classifications of incense.

I would like to recap the main points of the first two sections as follows:

(1) Most of the history of the art of fragrance has been connected with people in power because incense was so expensive to import from foreign countries. These people were able to live apart from the masses and could sublimate scent to an art. Compared to other arts, in the art of fragrance it is necessary to be removed from reality. After all, smell is so linked to actual life that it is difficult to see it as an art.

(2) The fact that the incense had names to classify it signifies that fragrance is not easily distinguishable. Each of the incenses was named after a Japanese poem or other work of literature and recalled a visual scene. Smell was also expressed in visual terms, such as "ni-ho-hu." That is to say, smell cannot be expressed as an independent form, it is connected with sight, taste, and sound. The lack of expressions of scent in Japan illustrates the essence of the sense of smell. It can only, should only, be experienced through the other senses, especially when it comes to art.

(3) Smell is, as in kodo, closely connected with the memories and the incidents of our past, so it is often said that the sense of smell is subjective. This may be in close relation to (1), because the transcendence of time and space is equal to being removed from reality. Why is scent connected with memory? When we experience an event, all the senses begin to work. But the sense of smell is the most difficult to be conscious of, making us notice it more in the experience of the art of fragrance and making the impression that much deeper.

The above leads us to some philosophical considerations. As I have shown in (1) and (3), smell creates an ideal world in a unique way through kodo. This world is initially a subjective one connected with our personal life and memories, but through the smelling of a fragrance and the engaging of the other senses, we can inhabit the same sensory world together. It is this shared pleasure that encourages us to feel sympathy with others beyond time and space in every art form. As the appreciation of fragrance demonstrates, the essence of art can become a chance to live our life more fully as well as a chance to connect with others.

In addition to the issue of art, I would like to refer to the issue of art and the senses, leading to (2), which is the main purpose of this paper. From the analyses of ko and kodo, we realize that it is difficult for the sense of

smell to exist on its own. It often borrows expressions from the other senses. But what are the peculiar characteristics of the sense of smell? It is appropriate to say that the characteristics apply to all the senses and not only the sense of smell. In Western philosophy, the word "synesthesia" is used to describe this blending of the senses. This has been argued using the sense of sight. For example, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) insisted that there was no "pure" sense. He believed they overlapped with each other. For him, the sense which played the most important part was the sense of sight. But it could also be said through the analyses of ko and kodo that this is also the case for the art of fragrance. At first, we may "smell" the incense, but then, not only smell but touch, listen, taste, and look at it. Such a synthesis is the product of the intellectual understanding of physical experience; in other words, there is no distinction between the senses in real life. And so it is in ko and kodo. In kodo, all of the senses are triggered and alert, and this is the essence of every form of art.

3. CONCLUSION

Throughout the course of this paper, I have attempted to demonstrate the essence of the relationship between art and the senses, especially regarding the sense of smell. For this purpose, I have introduced ko and kodo, the unique Japanese traditional art of fragrance. Through my analysis of ko and kodo, I have detailed the characteristics of the sense of smell and how these characteristics might be applied to all the arts.

Finally, I would like to ask the participants of this conference to consider the future of the sense of smell in art. For me, the most interesting aspect of the sense of smell is its ambiguity. The fact that it has been so hard to develop the art of fragrance might be blamed on the essential ambiguity of fragrance. But if this quality is put to better use in various fields of art, the future of the sense of smell would seem to have limitless potential.