

Chromatic symbolism in Japanese art and its influence on western art

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Since the oldest times, a significant quality of Japanese Art is its ability to express the artist's feelings through colors. Not only that: the subject of the work of art is expressed, enriched with the manifestation of feelings, through a great chromatic variety. This can be seen in other cultures, but it becomes a peculiarity of Japanese art due to the frequency and perfection in which it is done.

Before Japanese artists expressed their feelings through colors, symbolism appeared in their works through the predominant color of the materials they used. This can be seen in the second part of Jomon Period which according to the results of sophisticated analysis of pieces of ceramics found recently in a cave of Fukui, in Kyushui Island, started c. 7.000 years b.C. and lasted until c.250 b.C. After more utilitarian vessels were produced, in the second part of that long period appeared some earthen figures, called *dogu*, representing human beings and animals. Most of these figures have been found in populated centers, indicating that they were used for religious purposes as idols. A mysterious and strange expression emerges from their eyes; they do not have a dead expression, lost inside their pupils, but they have a penetrating look. In all these figures, human shape is always expressed in abstract but easily recognizable form. It could be that this tendency towards a figurative abstraction, is pretended as a way to represent deities or spirits endowed with superhuman power, but without losing the human figure. Some of these figures are feminine with prominent breast and massive hips, just as the idols of fertility in the pre-historic Europe. Some others are surrounded by a kind of stone halo that makes us think of a protective deity from whom help is asked. In any case, it is certain that those primitive artists would think that their creations were endowed with a kind of spiritual power, as a channel to become closer to human beings. As the art critic Hiroshi Mizuo asserts, *This could be the only case in which "spiritual functionalism" can be seen so clearly*¹. (Fig. 1-4)

It is significant that in most cases these figures are made of a dark earth. In this way the artists intended to express more forcefully the magic and spiritual reality they represented. Dark earth, without the color that would liken them to human beings, was chosen to show the superiority of those idols and the most effective way to indicate their supernatural character. It is the first manifestation of chromatic symbolism in Japanese art².

In the following Yayoi Period (c.250 b.C.-c.250 a.D), we find for the first time a simplification of the figures and all the ceramic pieces. It is a sign of the cultural development that naturally also appears in the way of representing the idols. But in Yayoi Period, although chromatic variety does not yet appear, feelings are manifested through light and shade, black and white colors. Chromatic symbolism shows out in this original way. The holes made in the mud qualify to the figure to show feelings of admiration, surprise, pain or happiness. This system of combining light and shade, darkness and luminosity, is a step in the development of symbolism manifested in the figures. (Fig. 5).

Buddhism arrived in Japan during the Ancient Tombs Period (Kofun Period, 250.552 a.D.), a time of a bigger development in the society and in the art of Japan. It is a time when large tombs are built for important persons, and mural paintings appear in the interior of them. These paintings are generally made following geometric designs, already colored with pigments made of earth and vegetable products. These geometric forms convey highly abstract feeling, and its symbolic meaning is difficult to grasp. Undoubtedly, they allude to the life of the dead person even if the use of figurative elements are not yet available. It happens this way in the tomb of Otsuka. (Fig. 6)

Later in the same Kofun Period, figurative paintings appear in the interior of the tombs. There is a composition, of little chromatic wealth, but of high symbolic sense: a human figure appears together with an unidentified line that could mean the unfinished march further on toward the Infinite. The symbolism of the "further on" is represented by this line which does not seem to end. (Fig. 7).

Another important tomb for its symbolic painting is that of Tahahara. This tomb presents a single pictorial composition as decoration of the funeral camera. The monochrome drawing is made

with firm and resolved brushstrokes, of dark color on the clear background, forming a composition full of meaning: a man, covered with a helmet and dressed with some wide pants, takes a horse by the reins. A strange animal with a very long tail and horse appearance is suspended in the air: it may be an imitation of the mythological dragons of the primitive paintings in China. Beside the man and the horse, a half open circle seems to indicate the silhouette of a boat: this was an frequent element in the funeral paintings, indicating that the deceased's soul was taken beyond the grave regions. Further below, four signs in spiral form indicate the waves where the boat navigates. On both sides, there are two big fans or parasols that indicate the deceased's nobility. Prof. Mori Teijiro gives the following interpretation: the horse walks on the earth, the ship opens up road on the waves, and the dragon flies in the air. This indicates the burning desire that the deceased's soul finds the step by all possible means to the eternity. In these paintings one can already see the tendency to abstract expression that appears in Japanese paintings of later times. In this work, the monochrome drawing enhances the force of symbolism that represents³. (Fig. 8-9)

The symbolic force of light and shade, white and black colors, darkness and light, appear in an extraordinary way in the *Haniwa* figures, that are one of the most original creations of Japanese sculpture. Those appear in the old tombs of the Kofun Period in the 3rd and 4th centuries. Very simple figures, made of mud, with very few descriptive *elements*, but full of a tremendous expressive symbolism. They represent men and animals that are able to express all kinds of feelings with so few elements: happiness and sadness, surprise and fear, etc. The art critic Watsuji Tetsuro, referring to the *haniwa*, has written:

Look at them, if you prefer, from a distant place; but the strange thing is that, the more you go away, the more real they appear and less the simplicity of their execution is noticed. In the measure in which one moves away from them, the eyes become real eyes, true windows of the soul; the whole face lights with life, and the whole figure of the haniwa seems to become alive⁴.

The *haniwa* are a definitive step in the development of Japanese sculpture. Before arriving to the chromatic description, through the game of light and shade, they have the symbolic force that colors will have in later periods. (Fig. 10-15)

With the arrival of Buddhism in 552 a.D., Japanese sculpture reaches one of the highest moments in perfection: in Asuka Period (552-646), Buddhist iconography presents data of an incredible simplicity, only comparable with the *haniwa* figures, but able to express a deep spirituality. An example is the image of Miroku Bosatsu (Koryu-ji, Kyoto). (Fig. 16) In contrast to this simplicity of lines and coloring, the images of the Guardian Spirits of Buddhism, mainly the group of the Shinyakushi-ji, in Nara, are full of power and color. It was sought to represent in these images a group of Buddhist beings that had the function of driving away the bad spirits, an action for which coloring is appropriate. In contrast with the previous idealized images, the chromatic element increases the force of these guardian spirits, with violent expressions and postures indicating that they are ready to repel all kinds of bad spirits. The strong coloring, made out of pigments dissolved in different layers of lacquer, make up the sense of fear that experience the visitors to a Buddhist temple. (Fig. 17-21)

A similar means of communicating feelings through the chromatic force can be found, from the 6th century on, in the masks used in classic theater and ritual dances. In these masks, the symbolic force of colors is united with the contrast of light and shade, through the holes open in the eyes and the mouth. These masks continue to be used in later centuries, and they always maintain the capacity to express the feelings of the actors who wear them by this chromatic system. It is one of the characteristics of Japanese theater, and even at the present time they keep the same vivacity of many centuries ago. (Fig. 22-25)

When Buddhist painting reached its fullness in Japan, in the years of the Heian Period (794-1185) and the Kamakura Period (1185-1333), the power of chromatic symbolism was notably developed. There is a series of works attributed to Monk Genshin, preacher of the sect of Amida's Paradise in which that quality is particularly manifested⁵. The term *Raigo-zu* is applied to the works that represent the descent of Amida who comes down from his paradise to receive the souls of those who have died with full faith in other life. One of these works is the tryptic in the museum of Koyasan, in Wakayama-ken. The great figure of Amida appears in the center of the composition, colored in gold, meaning the height of his dignity. The mantle of Amida is decorated with the technique called *kirikane*: it is a method of ornamental painting, in which silver or gold leaves are cut in small pieces

and are applied to the surface instead of brush strokes of painting. This technique is also good to exalt with its brilliant coloring the figure of Amida and to give him the excellence that has in the Buddhist vault. The shine of the golden halo surrounding the figure is a symbol of the light that emanates from him. Everything in the main figure is an exaltation of glory that increases the feeling of trust in the greatness of the power of Amida on the part of the spectator, who is located in front of the work. The same feeling of glory appears in the group of the accompanying *Bosatsu* or *Boddhisatva*, a multitude of winged musicians that form a descending procession together with the Buddha Amida. The movement of the group is described by means of clouds that come down to the rhythm of the central figure and of the music instruments the *bosatsu* are playing. The brilliant colors of their vestiments, mainly the brilliant violet and the dark blue, contrast with the gilding figure of Amida. The art historian Akiyama Terukazu thinks that the present brown color of the clouds on which the *bosatsu* ride, should be originally violet, to reproduce the color of the clouds that the Buddhist *Sutra*⁶ describes. Everything in this work is ingrave, developed in an atmosphere of winged dynamism that helps to reproduce the celestial atmosphere of Amida's Paradise. To get it, the chromatic clarity, transformed into gold in the main figure, is the manifestation of the exultant happiness that reigns in the promised paradise. (Fig. 26)

Another work, attributed to monk Genshin, is the one titled *Amida rising on the mountains*, in the National Museum of Kyoto. The great aesthete Anesaki Masaharu defends the traditional attribution to Genshin⁷. The figure of Amida only appears of half body, rising on the mountains of a landscape that occupies the inferior half of the painting. His head is surrounded by a halo of light, from where the rest of the work is illuminated. This radiant halo is like a sun that illuminates the landscape on which emerges. In this case, the salvation promised in the Amida's Paradise is represented by the illuminating figure that clarifies the surrounding darkness of the landscape.. (Fig. 27).

A painting of an anonymous artist is the one titled *Nirvana*, or The Death of the Buddha (in the Monastery of Kongobu-ji of Mt. Koya). The center of the work is occupied by the lying figure of Buddha, dressed in a white robe, made according the *kirikane* technique that contrasts with the brilliant yellow of his body. The clear colors of the surrounding figures make stand out the image of Buddha. The *Bosatsu* are painted in clearer colors than the rest of the composition: this confirms that they stand out on the other figures, because the chromatic clarity is a sign of the high degree of their interior illumination that emerges to the exterior. For this reason, their attitude is of great serenity, since they know the meaning of this sublime moment, in contrast with the rest of the figures that, for still not being illuminated, are described with darker colors and with tears in their eyes. In this work, the chromatic variety indicates the *higher* or lower degree of interior illumination. The figure of Buddha, that has already reached the highest degree of illumination entering the *Nirvana*, is painted in more brilliant colors. The same thing happens in the *Bosatsu* who stands out in the middle of other beings who are not yet inwardly illuminated, and consequently do not understand the meaning of Buddha's entrance into Nirvana. (Fig. 28 - 31)

An incredible chromatic variety is shown in the painting of the *e-makimono*. These are long paper rolls, in which a narrative painting is described. Generally the *e-makimono* illustrates the story that appears written in those rolls. The artistic level of these paintings is very high. These works were intimately united to the Japanese school of painting, *Yamato-e*, that reached its highest pick in the Heian (794-1185) and the Kamakura (1185-1333) Periods, the Middle Age of Japan. In the beginning of the following Muromachi Period (1333-1573), the *Yamato-e* School of painting lost its popularity, and the *Kara-e* Chinese School of painting gained again more esteem in Japan⁸.

Among the *e-makimono* paintings, *The History of Prince Genji* is the classic work of Japanese painting. It is based on a novel written by Lady Murasaki Shikibu (975-1031), who served as a lady in-waiting of Empress Joto-mon-in, wife of Emperor Ichijo. This novel is famous for its detailed description of all the persons in the novel, and it is considered one of the greatest works in world literature. This novel is illustrated by a large number of paintings that describe the text written next to each scene plastically. The art critic Akiyama Terukazu affirms that this *e-makimono* consisted originally of ten rolls, in which there were 90 illustrative paintings. At the present time only 19 are conserved. The paintings represent important episodes of the novel, and they precede passages written in characters of beautiful calligraphy on richly decorated paper.

These paintings are made with a technique very unusual in the West: the perspective is taken from the upper part of the scene, looking from a high angle of the right side. Another originality consists in the omission of the roofs of the houses, to show the interior and the scenes that are taking part in them. J. Edward Kidder, a great critic of Japanese art, describes it this way:

The handling of diverse conventional elements is so coherent, that should have a previous tradition. These elements are: allowing the views from the exterior toward the interior, uninterrupted because roofs are taken off ("fukinuki-yatai": flown roofs); the moving scenes from right to left, underlined by the architecture in angle ("shasenkyo": perspective in oblique lines), and the space of the room showed up to show with more precision the interior⁹.

The figures are represented in a completely stylized way: two lines mark the eyes; an angular line indicates the nose, and a red stain the lips. This stylized method is due to the desire of personifying the ideal characters for the spectator who is in front of the work. In this way, noblemen could see themselves depicted in each one of the heroes of the history. (Fig. 32-38)

The coloring presents a special symbolism. The black color of the hairs serves as a continuous rhythmic contrast with the total coloring of the painting. The employment of different tonalities has in each scene a symbolic meaning: colors indicate happiness or sadness; they give the atmosphere of solitude or of joy that reigns in each particular episode. There are moments in which the hero appears painted in clear, almost white color, while in his surroundings there is an exaltation of strong coloring: his interior solitude is symbolized this way, in spite of the bustling joy of those that are around him. It is particularly ornamental the color of the palace curtains, of the floors on which the persons rest, and of the magnificent suit of the ladies of the court. This insinuating language of the colors is an invaluable value, among others, in this singular work of the Japanese art.

Without almost no artistic precedent, in the first part of the 12th century this work appears in Japan, the highest pick of the typically Japanese style painting, and at the same time it will be a point of outburst of other later works of the *Yamato-e* school. This *e-makimono* has been attributed for a long time to Fujiwara Takayoshi, but due to the style and technique employed, it seems that this is the work of several artists. A single artist would make the complete plan of the work, and later on many painters and specialists of Japanese calligraphy would carry out it.

One of the countless *e-makimono* of the Middle Ages of Japan is the titled *Ippen Shonin Eden*, that describes monk Ippen Shonin's itinerant life, preaching the Buddhist doctrine. In this work, a solitary landscape of winter appears in the painting *expressing* the interior solitude of that fervent preacher, when his sermons were not accepted by his listeners. (Fig. 39) There is another view of a snow landscape of the surroundings of a Shintoist Temple, taken from the work of Taskashima Takakane, titled *Kasuga Gongen Kenki E-maki*. A feeling of solitude in the landscape can be seen, expressed though the snowy mountains. (Fig. 40)

In the Momoyama Period (1573-1615), after an enormous development of the painting in Chinese ink in the previous period, a new style arises that responds to the social and political circumstances: the unity of the country, accompanied by the wish of the military leaders to show their power also in art. There is a special grandiosity in the style of this period, that shows the splendor in the time of Momoyama. The new painting will serve, mainly, to decorate the palaces of the military leaders of the moment. The style was intrepid, emerging from a golden background. However, in these paintings there is not an empty sumptuousness: they are works carried out with certain ornamental sense that reflects the taste of the best periods of Japanese art. The application of plane and brilliant colors, the abstract designs, the decorative tendency, all these are data that already existed in the best works of *Yamato-e* school. The promoter of the new pictorial style was Nobunaga, who found the brilliant artist that would be able to capture in his works the sense of grandiosity characteristic of the period: Kano Eitoku. Nobunaga asked him to decorate his Azuchi Castle and, later, Hidedoshi also asked him to do the same in the Osaka Castle and the Jurakudai palace.

In these paintings, the chromatic wealth done on a golden background shows the splendour of the Momoyama Period. The golden color is the most adequate expression in a time of glory when Japan's exultation is reflected in the large paintings of the best artists of the Kano School. Once again, and this done with an incredible variety, chromatic symbolism appears in the art of Japan¹⁰. (Fig. 41-44)

In this period, a first influence of Western art can be seen. Japanese artists were influenced by an art that was so new in the themes and in the way of giving expression to them. They were so confident in their own achievements and tradition, that they tried to represent the new ideas in their proper techniques and methods. A significant work of the so called *Namban School* that arose under the influence of Western art in Japan, is *Our Lady with the Child and the 15 Mysteries of the Rosary* (in the University of Kyoto), painted at the end of Momoyama Period¹¹. (Fig. 45)

In this work, Japanese artists have known how to unite the traditional Japanese technique applied to a Christian theme which was completely new for them. This painting is made on paper and with the pigments used in the traditional works of Japan. The chromatic richness is also the traditional one, and there are aesthetic *elements* comparable to pieces of some *e-makimono* of the best times in Japanese art. These *techniques* have been some times combined with others that had just been known in Japan, like the use of light and shade in painting, and the perspective in Western style. There is, however, an aesthetic element that is characteristic of the best Japanese painting, present, mainly, in the *History of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*), the classic work of Japanese art: the symbolic use of chromatism. It has been applied to the mysteries of Christ's life, a fact of an incalculable value. In the description of the joyful mysteries some color of clear, but not brilliant tonality have been used; in the painful mysteries the colors are of much darker tonalities, and in the glorious mysteries openly clear and brilliant colors are used. Thus, in the first part of Christ's life there is a tonality of half clarity, while in the description of Christ's Passion the colors of dark tones express the suffering and the pain; finally, in the mysteries of glory the brilliant colors are the expression of the glory and Christ's victory over death.

Later on, in the 19th century, the oriental influence on European art is definitive. All the artistic schools of Europe looked to the East as a way to find creativity and liberation from the realism where they were submerged. Matisse, in one of his writings, has a sentence that could be compared with those of many oriental aesthetes:

*There is an essential truth that should be separated from the external appearance of the object that must be represented. It is the only truth that it cares...*¹².

This sentence reminds us another one of the monk of Zen Buddhism, Suzuki Daisetsu, who writes in one of his works:

*Beauty is not in the external shape, but in the meaning that it expresses*¹³.

The accuracy with the represented objects is not the truth: this is the thesis of the whole period of modern art. But, certainly, the followers of Fauvism expressed it most definitively. In this artistic school, the tendency is mainly to manifest the interior meaning through external chromatism. In the first place, a clear vision is given in the artist's interiority; then the selection of colors comes out. This supposes that there is not a predetermined theory of the color that corresponds to each thing; the artist should find every time a color that corresponds to his sensations. Matisse, in his writing *Notes d'un peintre*, published in *La Grande Revue* (Paris, Dec. 25, 1908), refers to the external expression as a manifestation of the interiority:

*What I look for, above all, is the expression. I am unable to distinguish among my way of feeling life and my way of expressing it...The place occupied by the figures or the objects, the empty spaces that surround them, the proportions, everything represent a role they play. The composition is the art of ordering in an ornamental way the diverse elements at the painter's disposal for the expression of his feelings*¹⁴.

Naturally, in this expression of the artist's feelings, colors have an important role. Artists found in Fauvism and in other schools of modern painting an ideal means to manifest their interior feelings through chromatism that they would never abandon..

One of the most outstanding artists of this tendency was Vassily Kandinsky (1866-1944). The growing abstraction in the landscapes and the compositions of Kandinsky's figures is due to the fact that colors separate gradually from the descriptive meaning in order to achieve, only with chromatic and lineal elements, the manifestation of the interiority. He ends saying,

A work of art consists of two elements, the interior and the exterior. The interior one is the emotion in the artist's soul; the emotion has the capacity to generate a similar emotion in the observer. The interior element, the emotion, should exist;

*in other case, the work of art is a lie. The interior element determines the form of the work of art*¹⁵.

Based on this definition of the work of art, Kandinsky goes on to sustain that the form and the color constitute in themselves a *convenient* language to express the emotion. Form and color act directly on the soul as music does. The only requisite is to compose the form and the color in a configuration that expresses adequately the interior emotion, so as to communicate it in an appropriate way to the observer. It is not necessary to give to form and color *an appearance of materiality*, namely, an appearance of material objects. Beauty is the achieved realization of this correspondence between the interior necessity and the expressive significance. There are manifestations of other artists of the same time that seem to indicate the identical desire to manifest the spirituality in art, but maybe Kandinsky is the one who speaks *more openly* of art as an internal necessity. This conviction leads him to present the spiritual aspects of man and, - because he is not tied down to material elements-, to express it in an abstract manner. (Fig. 46-47)

All these ideas seem to be taken from the way of expression that Japanese artists cultivated for many centuries. For them, art was a necessity to manifest the interiority that could not be made by means of realistic figures, and for that reason they went as far as the abstract expressions. There were times, however, when some schools of art like the Zen Buddhist, had enough with a few brush strokes of black ink and empty spaces for their works. This was always done in a direct communication with the observer of the works of art.

This way of expressing feelings through chromatism was done in all the periods of Japanese history until recent time, thus becoming an aesthetic and permanent quality of Japanese art.

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