ART HISTORY RESEARCH PAPER

AN INVESTIGATION OF JAPANESE AESTHETIC LIFE THROUGH THE WORK OF SŌTATSU AND KŌRIN

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 1997

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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Obtaining an understanding of the main components of the Japanese insight into beauty requires not only a grasp of the formal visual elements of the style, but also an understanding of the aesthetic as it pervaded every aspect of life in Japan. Much has been written about the intimate relationship between crafts such as pottery and spiritual life under the influence of Zen, but in screens we have examples of a Japanese art form which blend characteristics of the flat, painted image with those of objects of utility. During the Momoyama and Edo eras of the 17th and 18th centuries came new advances in the Japanese style of painting, primarily due to the artists Sōtatsu and Kōrin, now referred to as "The Great Decorators."

This paper traces the traditional Japanese aesthetic from its Eastern religious and philosophical background to its expression in the screen paintings of the Sōtatsu-Kōrin School. Connections to the activities of the Japanese way of life of the period and the specific vocabulary used to discuss art of all varieties in Japan help to illuminate key concepts such as irregularity, simplicity, intuition, decoration, pattern, and utility. All of these are intimately related to the Buddhist and Zen procedures for living an artful and natural life and all seek to provide a harmonious blend between the artificial and the natural.

Tawaraya Sōtatsu (1576-1643) and Ogata Kōrin (1658-1716) were two extraordinarily gifted artists comparable in many ways to their contemporaries, Shakespeare and El Greco. As with all important artists, the qualities of their work reflects the society in which they were created; the defining qualities of the screen paintings Sōtatsu and Kōrin made were also the defining qualities of what has come to be identified as the Japanese aesthetic. Much more than with their contemporaries in the West, however, the insight into beauty pervaded every aspect of life for the Japanese masters. The religious teachings, historical influences, and most every daily activity expressed the aesthetic virtues which defined their paintings.

A careful look at the screen paintings of Sōtatsu and Kōrin, two of the most important painters in Japanese history, gives insight into an aesthetic which is more a way of life than a prescription for artistic expression. Their screens were certainly products of their individual genius and the historical influences of the society, but also grew out of the models for living a beautiful life which surrounded the artists. The "Cult of the Aesthetic" arose from Zen Buddhism (borrowed from China and transformed into a belief system which is purely Japanese) and permeated every facet of life, finding expression in literature, theater, calligraphy and the Tea Ceremony as well as the otherwise mundane chores of daily existence.

In looking at the vocabulary used to describe art in Japan and the principles which seem to have dominated the creation of art and the Japanese way of life in general, a better understanding of the Japanese aesthetic can be reached. The main elements of this ideal can be generalized in the

following terms: irregularity, simplicity, intuition, utility, and decoration. Though it is customary to relate these elements to crafts such as pottery as in Sōetsu Yanagi's important book, The Unknown Craftsman, the screens of the Sōtatsu-Kōrin School are better suited to illuminate terms such as decoration, abstraction, pattern and repetition as we know them in painting. In these fine paintings, we can see evidence of Zen-based aesthetic characteristics, as well as seemingly contradictory secular ones.

To fully comprehend the Japanese aesthetic, a Westerner must first recognize that the philosophy which provides the foundation of our thought process and education is dramatically different than that of the Easterner. Western religion places man at the top of the pyramid of nature. Made in God's image, we are naturally better, different, and separate from the rest of creation. With this as a basis, Aristotle set out to explain the separation between man and his instincts and proposed a dichotomy between Conscious Will and Involuntary Acts. Descartes and Kant continued this line of thinking while attempting to describe the problematic terms of Subjectivity and Self-Reflection, where man seeks his own order in the observation of the objective world. In the West, from Plato on, the intellect has been what helps us to grasp the world around us (Minai 127-8).

In much of the East, however, Philosophy as a discipline does not even really exist as we know it; Philosophy is a way of life rather than a study of life. Philosophy in Japan, as it is derived from China and Indian beliefs, is closer to what we would label Mystic Religion, the key aspects of which include: 1) a moment of human illumination which leads to a state of knowing through revelation, insight, or intuition as opposed to reason or analytical methods; 2) unity among all things; 3) a denial of time; and, 4) the absence of evil which is produced by divisions

and oppositions of the intellect. In Buddhism and Hinduism, there is no hierarchy of nature as "the multitude of things and events around us are simply different manifestations of the same ultimate reality" (Minai 150). There are no fixed eternal permanences such as Ego and Self, and knowledge is a superficial and unstable foundation for understanding life. In Zen and Tao sects, "Nature is the *dynamic* interplay between two opposite but complimentary aspects of *Yin* and *Yang*," which constitute poles intrinsically linked to each other and in constant interaction. Zen, which exemplifies love of naturalness and spontaneity, is a hybrid blend of the "Philosophies" of the Japanese way of life, Indian Mysticism, and Chinese Tao. All of these Eastern paradigms are interested in "intuitive wisdom" rather than "rational knowledge" and attempt to free men from the limitations of the artificial world. "Careful observation of nature and strong intuitive judgments lead to profound insights which are [coincidentally] confirmed by modern scientific theories" (Minai 151).

Zen always aims at grasping the central facts of life which can never be dissected by the intellect. Each person possesses the capacity to be enlightened. Accordingly, for the Zen practitioner, art is one way for the ordinary man to allow the natural self to emerge through spontaneity. An understanding of the central facts of life can be grasped through meditation on nature, and art flows naturally from the cultivation of this humanness. Art challenges our need for creativity; it helps us overcome ego-centeredness as we join others in a common task, and brings forth goods which are necessary for human existence. In the Zen way of living, therefore, art is another way of discovering how much quality can be invested in a "fleeting moment by pouring one's self creatively and fully into the possibilities that are resident *now*" (French 170).

It is a well-known cliche that Japan's culture is defined by its opposition to an Other

(Kuroda 3). Until the mid-nineteenth century, the primary Other was China. It is clear that many aspects of Chinese culture sowed the seeds for what is known as Japan's civilization, the evidence of which lies in popular forms of art, religion, literature, and architecture. But once a foreign culture is absorbed by Japan, it undergoes a rapid transformation that renders the seed virtually unrecognizable (Kuroda 34).

The first screens, for example, came from China where they were often believed to prevent evil spirits from entering a space, but the Chinese influence did not go much beyond the basic introduction of the idea. In fact, the Chinese ink painters of the Sung Dynasty believed that it was a lesser medium on philosophical grounds. They felt it beneath their dignity to paint on such large supports when attempting to convey the intensely personal means of expression for their ideas and philosophy. Most decided that the small and intense brush strokes in their paintings should be on a more private scale, calling for closer viewing (Grilli 156). Japanese painters saw it differently, believing that the large screens could indeed be very intimate works. In Japan, screen painters fused poetry and painting and the ideas of Zen to make screen painting natural and virtually independent of the Chinese precedent.

A VOCABULARY FOR DESCRIBING THE JAPANESE AESTHETIC

In contrast to the critical writing common to Western art, in Japan there are terms for describing aesthetic values which may be puzzling to the Western reader. Though these terms are rarely used in the same context in Japan today, they give clear insight into very specific tastes and ideals common to Japanese artists throughout the ages. Three terms which warrant explanation

are *sabi, wabi,* and *shibui*. These concepts come from difficult and impoverished times in Japanese history and are crucial to an understanding of the Japanese aesthetic. *Sabi* is an adjective derived from the word for rust, *wabi* indicates honest integrity and poverty without impoverishment, and *shibui* is often translated as astringent, related to the flavor of the juice of the persimmons (LaPlante 231).

It should be clear that the implied meanings of these words go far beyond their literal translations. If *sabi* literally means "rusty," it also implies that an object is timeworn, or mellowed by use. This describes the general preference for old rather than new things, where the patina of metals and the weathering of unpainted wood intrinsically enhance the object by pointing to the greater reality of its impermanence. *Wabi* can only be reached through calm, composed, realization of the shortcomings of material wealth and opulence. It is a quiet elegance which is born of refinement and presence of mind, "to which we all aspire--literati as well as laymen." (Yanagi, Soetsu 184)

Shibui describes a bitter but refreshing flavor, which, when applied to art, indicates modesty, inwardness and restraint. It is an aesthetic principle based on simple naturalness and reverence, where these qualities in an object lead the *viewer* to draw the object's beauty out of *it.* With all three of these adjectives, a love of roughness is involved, behind which lurks a hidden beauty (Yanagi, Soetsu123-4). These terms, products of difficult times, describe efforts to go beyond the merely adequate without going beyond their own means. They intend to characterize a total harmony between man-made and natural objects.

Aware was first an exclamation of surprise and delight, then, when later applied to art, it took on a melancholy elegance, or moving emotion. In poetry and literature, the passing of love

and beauty or a cloud which covers the beauty of the moon was tinged with sadness and thus said to be *aware*. The sight of wrinkles around ones eyes give the feeling of this melancholic passing of time, where there is emotion inherent in the vision, as does the moment the cherry blossom falls from the tree. Similarly, *yūgen* gives a sense of the profound, remote, and mysterious. Borrowed from Chinese philosophical texts where it pointed to abstruse and mysterious aspects of nature and life, it describes situations of grace or elegance that encompass a sense of refinement, idealization, and contrast (Dewaskin 70). Like "symbolic" in English, it defines all things not easily described in words. *Yūgen* and *aware* are qualities of the highest realm of art:

> "...in the absolute domain to which all forms point. It tends to be expressed in bare and simple terms to keep the mind from dwelling too long on the beauty of the form presented, and thereby to allow it to leap to that realm. There is *yūgen* in the simple perfection of the Chinese jar which 'moves perpetually in its stillness'" (Hume 52).

The grandeur and flamboyance of Sōtatsu and Kōrin screens stretch these ideals to their limits, but even if a partial reaction against these ideals, the screens they painted are products of a way of thinking which is closely linked to them. Sōtatsu began his artistic search in the style of the simple and mysterious Chinese ink paintings, where land rises from the nothingness of low fog patches, imagery which continued throughout his career. Even when the white nothingness of the unpainted page was replaced with gold leaf and pigment, the *yūgen* is not lost. Kōrin began as a painter of simplified natural imagery of few brushstrokes on the pottery produced by his brother Kenzan, an artisan of equally high regard in his profession (Plate 1). Kōrin's work in pottery clearly influenced his sense of the reticent and natural elements which are the basis for even the most lavish of his paintings.

Figure 1. Tea cups made by Kenzan and Painted by Korin. (Mizuo 160)

THE VALUE OF IRREGULARITY

From the earliest forms of Japanese art, regularity, symmetry and completeness have been avoided. This is in sharp contrast to Western painting, and even Chinese and other Eastern painting which begin with a basis of centrality and balance to organize compositions. Balance in the pictorial sense is a foreign concept to the Zen believer who finds in nature a type of balance based on the unity of all things rather than on visual weights. In Japanese painting, even with a single figure, spatial arrangements draw on an area much wider than the figure itself, connecting it with nature and the cosmos as is dramatically portrayed in Sōtatsu's *Zen Priest Choka* or the pair of his screens of *The Wind and Thunder Gods*. (Plates 2 and 3)

Here, we see an emphasis on asymmetry of composition where, as in calligraphy, the unpainted parts of the surface are at least as important as the painted ones. The images are not in balance with the center of the page, but in a relationship of dynamic flux with the suggested surrounding nature. In his writings of c.1330, the Shinto priest Kenkō professed that, "In everything, uniformity is undesirable. Leaving something incomplete makes it interesting, and gives one the feeling that there is room for growth." (Hume 32) This is a virtue which is extolled in many Japanese activities including calligraphy (*shodō*[1]), flower arrangement (*ikebana*), pottery, and even poetry. In every case, asymmetry asks for our participation rather than our admiration.

Sōtatsu was well practiced in the art of calligraphy and monochrome ink painting (sumi-e) as we have seen, but in the collaborations with Koetsu (plate 3), we come to understand how intimately related the activities of painting and calligraphy were for them. Even in the ink

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[1]It should be noted here that the character for *-dō,* as in *shodō* or *sadō* (Tea Ceremony), means "way" or "road," thus indicating that these are not mere activities, but that they are ways of life which permeate one's being. A better translation of *shodō* would be,"the way of calligraphy."

Figure 2. *Zen Priest Choka.* Hanging scroll, ink on paper, by Sotatsu (Lee 471).

Figure 3. *Thunder God*. Section of a pair of two-fold screens, color on gold paper by Sotatsu.

paintings derived from Chinese works, only 15-25% of the surface would be colored, leaving the rest to evoke the "nothingness" that forms the context for all things. With calligraphy, as in *samurai* swordsmanship, the training is rigorous and designed to bring the artist to the level where the instrument moves itself *intuitively*. "The idea is to contemplate the subject long enough to become one with it, such that the subject literally paints itself." (Hume 90) This intuition of the essence of nature produces a natural form of irregularity. In the *Deer Scroll* (Plate 4), Sōtatsu's calligraphic deer refer to and accentuate Koetsu's written characters, but are not meant to provide any source of visual balance. On the contrary, the deer are irregularly, seemingly indiscriminately, placed on the scroll, and two are barely visible as their legs dangle from a place above the top of the page in a way that is not the slightest bit artificial.

THE SIMPLE PLEASURES OF SIMPLICITY

From the example of the Way of Calligraphy, it is easy to move to a discussion of the unassuming beauty of simplicity. *Wabi, Sabi,* and *Shibui* are words which describe simple, yet austere tastes of people who avoid extravagance, and have no craving for worldly success. Here, the term simplicity is applied to subdued, restrained, quiet, and pure living. But the term loses little of this description when applied to a pattern or design. Simplicity allows for suggestion and is the opposite of artifice.

Not until the seventeenth century, when Tosa Mitsuoki attempted to defend his image against the rival Kanō family of painters, did anyone attempt to formulate a Japanese theory of painting. His rules for painting indicate a subtle shift from the Chinese themes and techniques, but

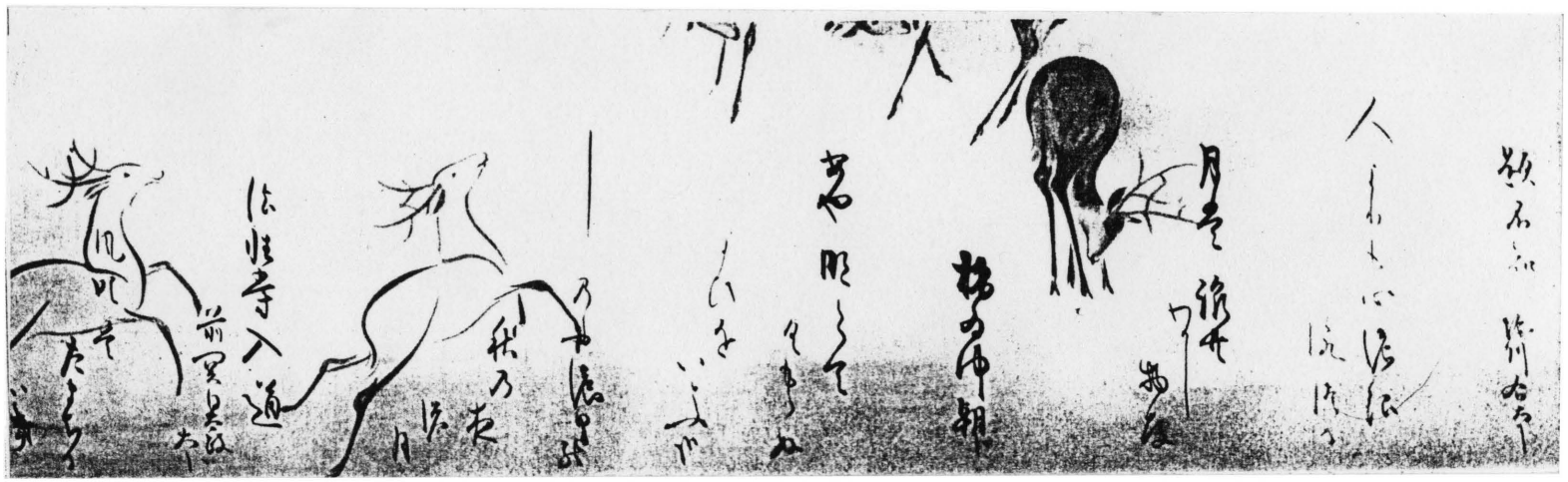

Figure 4. *Deer Scroll*. Section of a handscroll, gold and silver on paper, painted by Sotatsu, calligraphy done by Koetsu (Lee 172).

give great insight into the aesthetic principles discussed so far. It was Tosa's stance that painters should first learn to paint in observance with the laws of nature, believing that good paintings are lifelike and imitative of nature. An artist of this level will have learned all of the rules and techniques to represent nature in exact reproduction of shape and color, thus making a "Competent Work." The next step was to be able to depart from nature with the facility to distort and simplify without being self-conscious or casual about it. In so doing, he believed that a painter might even go beyond the laws of nature to an expression which is governed only by the laws of art. After these levels have been achieved, a "Marvelous Work" may occur in which the brushwork is superb, coloring is perfect, and meaning overflows, transcending established styles. The artist of this level paints meaning rather than shape and may then reach the final level which results in a "Divine Work." The painting at this stage is a product of a painter who has the spirit's circulation and life's motion. Images are simplified and spring from nature which is inborn and given by heaven. He goes on to confirm that simplicity should be the governing principle where patterns are better left incomplete, leaving the meaning unsaid and blank space as part of the picture. It is also clear, however, that this simplicity is not intellectual. Rather, it is an *intuitive* sense of simplicity which springs forth from a oneness with nature. (Ueda 131-9)

In the purely Japanese artform of Nō drama, of which Sōtatsu and Kōrin were both avid viewers and participants, simplicity has been the defining factor for 500 years. Nō is the embodiment of the Japanese preference for understatement, muted expression, and symbolic gesture. It has a Buddhist background and a priest is always the chief character who points to the religious significance of a story. It is both intense and austere, where all senses are focused on simple and symbolic movements, music, and poetic language. (Leach 80)

Simplification and incompleteness are closely related to each other because both make a work of art beautiful by suggesting something beyond the work itself. "Complete objects have nothing further to suggest and give the impression of rigidity and coldness." (Yanagi, Soetsu 150) The branches in Kōrin's *Red and White Plum Blossoms* screen (Plate 5, and detail, Plate 6) are delicately and accurately simplified to single brush strokes, while the blossoms are reduced to mainly two shapes: the unopened bud and the fully blossomed flowers.

NATURE INSPIRED INTUITION

Tosa Mitsuoki made it clear that the laws of art and the laws of nature are not mutually exclusive or contradictory, but complementary, and that a painter must learn the laws of nature before he contends with those of art. (Ueda 131) Asymmetry is a natural condition, and a simplification with integrity is one which is both true to nature and artificial. In other words, for Tosa, a good painting is nature with a human perspective and divine inspiration. This is the naturalness and spontaneity of Zen, where paintings "suggest the natural and the supernatural at the same time: the natural because it represents nature's beating heart, and the supernatural because only purified souls could seize [its] inner meaning." (Anesaki 127) Shinto, too, is an ancient Japanese religion based on man's relation to nature. In fact, it is a cult of nature, where the sun, rocks, trees, waterfalls, mountains, and animals are worshipped as divine.

As Otsuji (Seki Osuga), a noted poet and haiku theorist said, "We can enter the world of creation when we are completely sincere and humble before nature, yet free and fearless, when we are never separated from nature, when we do not introduce idle fancy or fall into cognition"

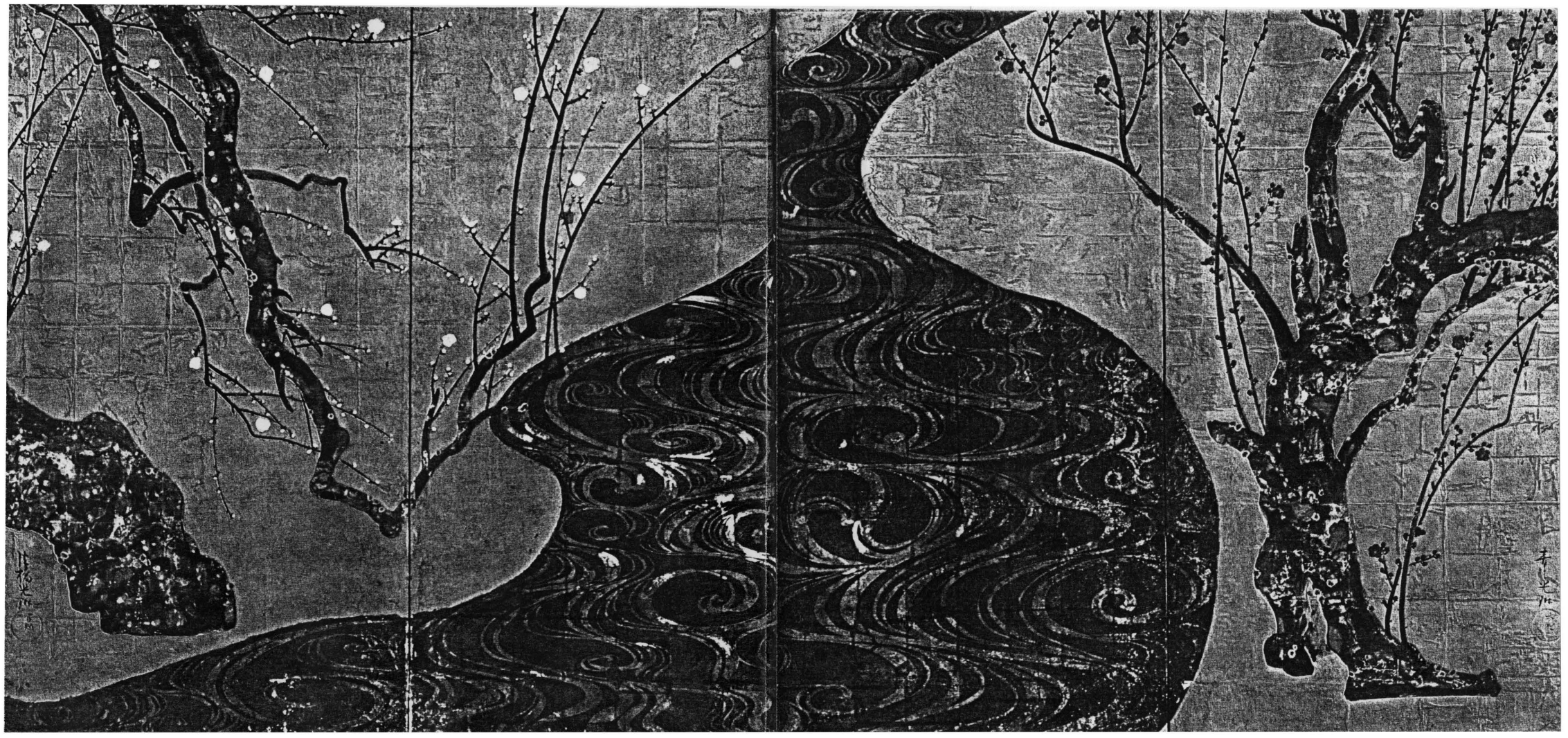

Figure 5. Korin, *White and Red Plum Blossoms*. Pair of screen paintings, colors on gold paper. Each Screen 61 X 68" (Akiyama 154-5).

Figure 6. Detail of *Red and White Plum Blossoms* (Grilli 106).

(Hume 132). To give up our intellectual concepts in order to fully experience reality requires a leap of intuition. The Zen technique of contacting things directly and intuitively involves putting aside the desire to judge immediately while simply looking, and being in a state of no-mindedness—ready to receive passively without personal interjections. Intuition appears void of intellect; it is not a steady progression of intellectual steps, but a leap of understanding.

The processes of painting with *tarashikomi,* puddled ink, or *haboku,* splashed ink, is a concept based on reverence for the spirits of the painting media. Sōtatsu and Kōrin both used these techniques apparently as a way of surrendering control to the spirits of paper, ink, and water. It was the spirits, then, which were permitted to make effects which naturally indicate organic textures and shapes (Figure 6). Through these and other techniques, Sōtatsu and Kōrin took real events as raw material, but the subject is intuitively and naturally redesigned so that it becomes clearer, more expressive, and more beautiful than the actual object. They do not imitate the subject, but intuitively recreate it to incorporate at once what is seen and what is known, marrying the subject and the surface without allowing the former to overpower the latter. (LaPlante 245-7)

UTILITY, PRACTICALITY, AND PERISHABILITY

Like Nō, the Way of Tea *(Sadō)* encompasses all of the austere and reticent virtues found in activities based on the Japanese Cult of Aestheticism. The Way of Tea, to be sure, is more than merely the activity of making and drinking tea; it is a way of living based in Zen Buddhism, which permeated Japanese culture for centuries. First used as a way to keep novice monks awake during long hours of meditation, the Tea Ceremony became a way to experience *wabi, sabi,* and

shibui in the company of others which reached its height in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. *Sadō* formulated a criteria for beauty based on concrete features of form, color, and design which prescribed the mannerisms, the utensils, and the decoration of the tea rooms. The code of aesthetics in the tea room suggested that cups and plates be of practical and wholesome natural beauty as are those clearly made by human hands and intended for daily use. Thus, they were simple, imperfect, irregular objects of nature. The room was supposed to include a rustic, unfinished support (as the trunk of a tree) to remind participants of the humble and reverent relationship between man and nature. Screens were often used to set the appropriate mood and to remind participants of the passing seasons in nature, such that even paintings were objects of utility; designed for specific aesthetic needs, they were often thought to be an invaluable part of the tea ceremony.

Documents from the Muromachi period (1392-1573) refer to painted screens as necessary equipment for reception rooms, along with Chinese objects which were of great importance to the room. They are a fantastic blend of the abstract and realistic, illusionistic and flat, sculptural and two-dimensional, which incorporate all of the elements of the Japanese aesthetic discussed here. As Sugawara no Michizane (895-903) described, "The characteristic of a [screen, (*byobu*)] lies in its opening and folding. If you sit surrounded by the *byobu,* immediately new worlds emerge around you, and you can enjoy your lasting pleasure" (Grilli, 153). These were objects of utility, specifically designed to affect the aesthetics of a space and transport those in its midst to the other world of Zen naturalness.

The Japanese and Chinese characters which make up the word *byobu* literally mean "protection from wind," or what we would call a screen. A direct response to Japanese

architecture in which there are few solid walls and large open spaces in drafty houses, the byobu served several practical purposes. As the name implies, screens were not only a way of breaking up space but also of protecting dwellers from the elements unabated by the thin walls of Japanese homes. They were also used for added privacy, to hide a part of a room, or divide the space into smaller sections. Not only for the tea ceremony, they provided movable backdrops for other important ceremonies and religious meditations as well. But their most important utility was simply to enhance the pleasure of daily life in Japanese interior spaces by making a more aesthetically pleasing environment of natural, outdoor scenes.

An interesting screen painting from an unknown artist of the Edo period is the image of an interior of a room displaying what appears to be Sōtatsu's famous *Waves at Matsushima* (Figures 7 and 8). The screen surrounds the tea-making utensils and has a kimono almost disrespectfully draped over it. This not only shows the physical use of the object, but also its importance in the room. The *Waves at Matsushima* screen with its undulating pattern of waves and organic forms would be more than a window to nature; it would be a direct link to nature's sublime inspiration.

In contrast to the archival approach to art in the West, in Japan there has been a conspicuous use of materials which discolor or even fall apart with age. It should not be surprising, in the context of irregularity and incompleteness, that this testament to the passage of time is valued as a virtue of perishability. A traditional taste for impermanent things pervaded the society from the paper walls which would need to be replaced periodically to the straw sandals which would wear out mid-journey. In detached observation of the passage of time, objects like pottery would crack and be mended time after time. Objects in perfect condition appeared to be

Figure 7 *Waves at Matsushima, by Sotatsu*. Left side of pair of six-paneled screens, colors on gold paper (Akiyama 150).

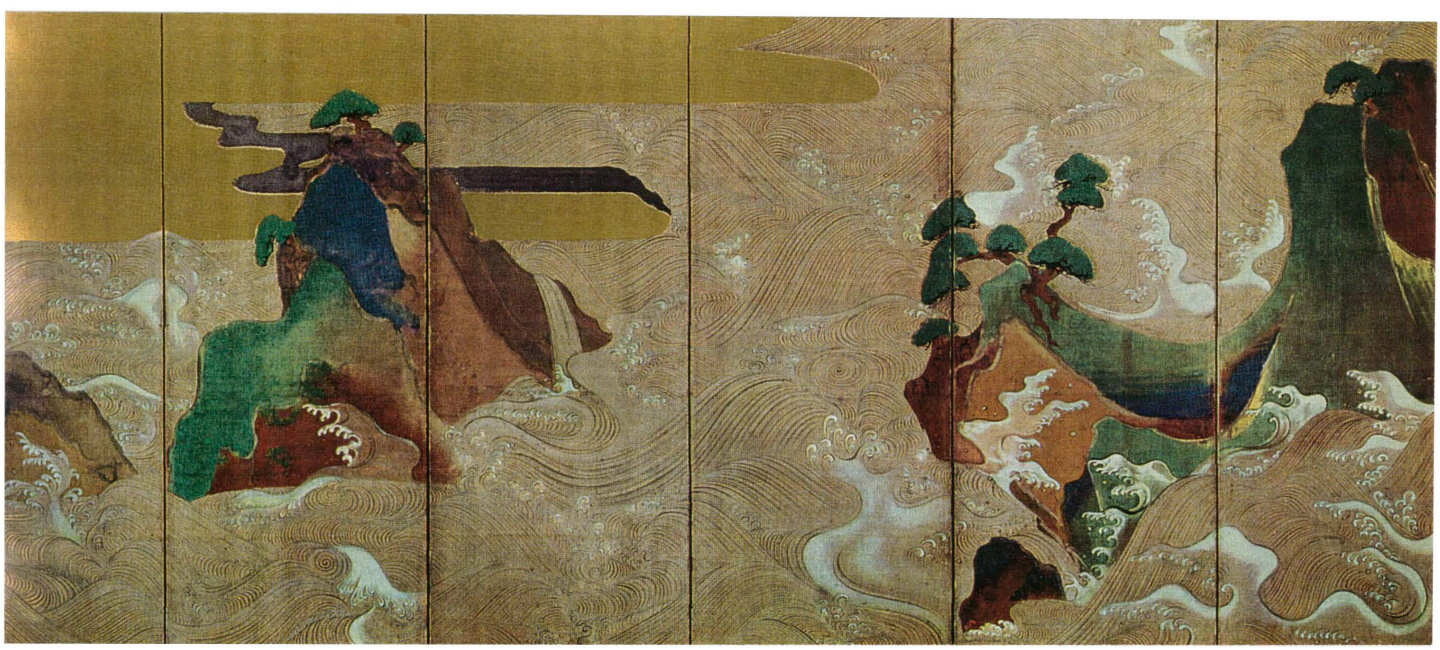

Figure 8. *Waves At Matsushima* (Right Side), by Sotatsu (Akiyama 151).

denied of their history, whereas the flaws of well-used objects were seen as intrinsically beautiful. Precious few examples of Japanese screens are still with us because they were made of paper and used often.

THE JAPANESE SENSE OF DECORATION

Only the more easily comprehensible part of the Japanese aesthetic with virtues of reticent naturalness has been discussed thus far. If one can explain the interest in Nō drama through its relationship to the religiously philosophical views of Zen, then how does the taste for the very popular and flamboyant Kabuki theater fit in? Characterized by larger-than-life poses, brilliant stage effects, etc., Kabuki seems in direct opposition to the aesthetic values of Nō (Figure 9).

In the arts, the more lavish and dramatic forms of expression emerged largely to communicate the ideals of the aristocracy, the patrons of large and expensive works such as screens. Still, even the merchant and other classes could not have been *wabi, sabi,* and *shibui* all of the time. While Nō expressed the religious morality of Zen Buddhism, Kabuki was a form of decadent entertainment, but this is not to say that the more colorful forms expressed contradict the nature of Zen teachings and the aesthetic values mentioned so far. On the contrary, the more deliberate abstractions and rhythmic movements provide another footpath between the natural and the supernatural, an other-world of dynamic flux between opposite, yet complementary aspects of life.

In a more specific example of harmony between disparate means of expression, screen painting evolved from the simple and refined Chinese style (*Kanga*) practiced by the Tosa School

Figure 9. Photo of Kabuki Theater actor. (Courtesy C.S.U. Wold Center Slide Library.)

to the more secular and Japanese *Yamato-e* of the rival Kano School during the Momoyama period (1573-1615). Often *Yamato-e* and *Kanga* paintings would be shown in the same room, so Sōtatsu and Kōrin would clearly have been familiar with both styles when they created their even more highly ornate and colorful images on screens almost entirely covered with gold leaf. In 1678, Kano Einō wrote:

> "...two painting traditions developed: one called Yamato-e and one called Kanga. Yamato-e could attain spirit-resonance, but it could not depart from the carefully detailed style...Tosa masters create Yamato-e filled with sensitivity and gentle grace. They paint figures, whether large or small, with simple lines...The Kano [school] is sovereign of painting schools; its branches extend far and wide. There is no shortage of talent among painters in the family and disciples in the workshop" (Grilli 153).

Though it is veiled in flattery, there is a definite sense that this Kano painter believed that his school had evolved from the earlier style of painting which embodied the taste of the military-class patrons of the Muromachi period (1392-1573) and was fostered in the meditative Buddhist atmosphere. The Momoyama period has been called the "golden age" of the Japanese screen, and when the bold, colorful designs were applied to the traditional themes of nature and the seasons, a new range of expressive possibilities was explored (Freer 1). This was an age of contradictions when the flamboyant compositions of Sōtatsu and a quiet and secluded tea room could be found in the same dwelling; both of these are typically Japanese.

To say that a painting is "decorative" would be an insult to the Western artist, implying banal patterning and simplification. Sōtatsu and Kōrin, however, would have worn their post-mortem titles of "The Great Decorators" with pride. Their "vigorous expression, baroque dynamics, elegance and delicacy, [were] all seen with the [eyes of naturalists]," but were transformed into the rhythms and accents of pattern (Grilli, 171). The brilliant orchestrations of

pattern across the horizontal expanse of the *byobu* were extremely decorative without defying the Zen inspired tradition.

Here we must look at the subtle differentiation between the Eastern and Western concepts of design, decoration, and pattern. While decoration in the Western experience often relies on geometric patterns and indicates a debased form of regular simplifications, Japanese designs and patterns were asymmetrical and never geometrical. Unlike the Western concept of a decorative element lacking design finesse, exact repetition was distasteful to all Japanese painters and craftsmen. Irregularities and variations were preferred to communicate the sensitive rhythms of nature. Thus, the feel for abstract design also comes from the understanding of nature as described earlier. A pattern is both true to nature and artificial—nature with a human viewpoint. It is not a re-creation of nature, it is a new creation born when one reproduces the intuitively perceived essence of an object (Yanagi, Soetsu 114).

At a glance, Kōrin's masterpiece *Irises* (Figure 10) seems to be a very simple and repetitive pattern of identical flowers. One has the impression, at first, that there is even a mathematical relationship between the elements, but on closer inspection, it becomes clear that the relationships are far too complicated for any geometrical simplification. As in nature, each flower is unique, but related to the others. The *Irises* screen flirts with repetition, but never becomes a pattern in that sense. There is a tension in which the elements pull and engage each other unlike a mere rubber-stamped pattern could do. Here, "repetition" carries the same meaning as the repetition of a master potter making hundreds of the same-sized bowls; each one is imbued with the wondrous irregularity that comes from the collaboration between the human hand and the

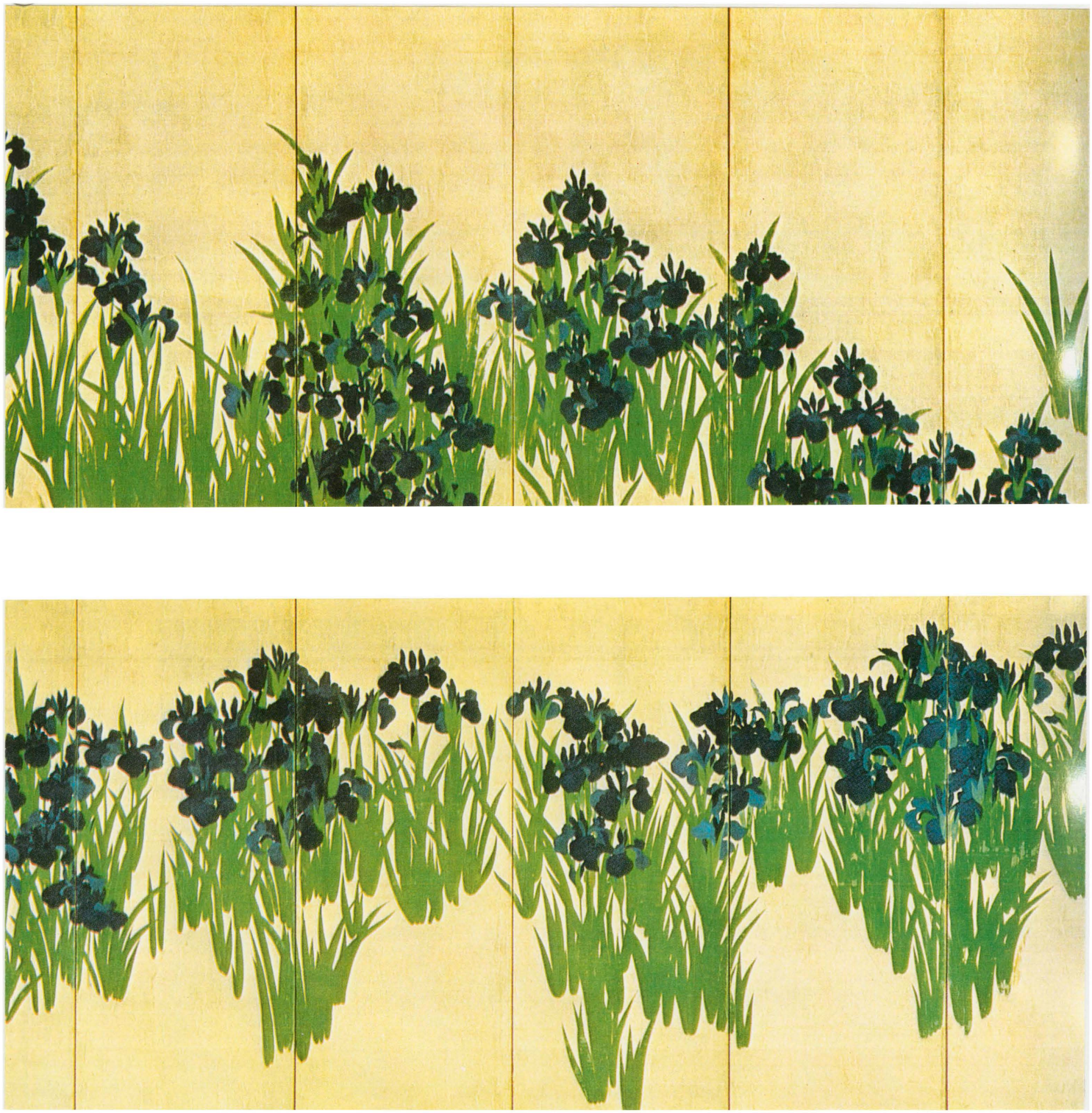

Figure 10 Irises. Pair of six-fold screens, color on gold paper, height 59", by Korin (Lee 480)

spirit of the materials. Each petal of every flower is clearly the creation of an artist who is both at one with nature, and master of his brush. This pattern was, by all means, created through an anti-intellectual and intuitive understanding of the natural world.

By abandoning all but the most basic technical and expressive restrictions of the Chinese style of painting, the dramatic line and color could be used for decorative effect. Sōtatsu and Kōrin were part of a growing tendency to consider the secular requirements of the patrons and environmental conditions of Japanese architecture. The screens covered with gold leaf have the prominent effect of increasing the light in the dark interiors, while exploiting the mystery as light reflects and shifts across the surface. In their screens, there is a greater reliance on abstract design principles and less on literal illusion. In Sōtatsu's *Matsushima* (Figures 7 and 8), we can identify three distinct approaches to representation and different points of view: 1) a more or less natural view, as in the branches of the trees; 2) the natural and unreal, as in the stylized waves below the "horizon line"; and 3) the abstracted or virtually unreadable, as in the rounded, golden areas of what may be sand bars or islands (LaPlante 246). Through abstraction across the large expanses of the screens, both artists reach the other world of Zen.

THE WAY OF AESTHETICS

While the paintings of the Sōtatsu-Kōrin school attained a high level of refinement and were pursued with profound consciousness of the traditions in which they functioned, the highest ideal was a seemingly artless spontaneity that grew out of the process of artful living. "The aesthete creates art and perceives the true and beautiful in art and nature--something always there, but rarely perceived" (Dewaskin 69). These were artistic geniuses, yet individuality was not a

highly valued quality and there was little mention of originality in any traditional Eastern discourse. Contrary to the Western rush to make work which has 'never been done before,' these artists simply lived life in a highly aesthetic culture and made art which seems to have flowed from them as naturally as spring water. In a single day, Sōtatsu might have meditated in a garden on the teachings of Zen and oneness with nature and observed a flower arrangement which was precariously and excitingly imbalanced. In the same day, he may well have participated in a *shibui* tea ceremony, surrounded by imported Chinese wares, while drinking from a simple and irregularly manmade cup, and later watched the moving, but austere, drama of the Nō theater. How could his paintings be any less beautiful than these, and how could he ignore the aesthetic virtues which all of these activities respected?

These paintings on screens operate in the context of a well integrated, holistic view of nature and humankind, where society is a part of nature, a piece of a large and organic whole. They were created by members of a society for which, "aesthetic undertaking itself is a natural and organic activity for humankind, a part of self-realization and self-refinement. [These are] practices that resonate with things in nature, [which in turn are] proper adaptations to the physical and social landscape" (Dewaskin 71). This orientation is a commitment and a process that brings both the creator of the painting and the audience closer to the Way; to be enfolded in one of these screens is to enter a world which is both a testament to the ingenuity of mankind and the inspiration of nature. They are products of men who were masters of the medium, as well as participants in a stunningly beautiful and pervasive way of life. Sōtatsu and Kōrin have left us testaments of the aesthetic Japanese way of life, where even the most mundane chores of washing dishes or chopping wood could be looked upon as artistic endeavors in the Zen spirit.

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