

## A Comparison between Asymmetric Japanese Ikebana and Symmetric Western Flower Arrangement

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**Abstract.** Ikebana, flower arrangement, is one of the traditional, highly appreciated arts of Japan. Even though “flower arrangement” is used in translation, there is a great contrast with Western style flower arranging. While the former has an asymmetric shape, the latter is based on symmetry. Why are they so different? What is the philosophy behind this? We would like to compare these two styles of flower arrangement and we hope to clarify the philosophy and spirit that supports these art forms. We will first talk about the history and cultural background of Ikebana, then the materials and the gardens (which can be regarded as flower arrangements on a large scale) of both Japanese and Western styles. Following on this, the spirit and religions that mold the asymmetry and the symmetry will be discussed.

### 1. Introduction

The origin of Ikebana, Japanese flower arrangement, dates from around the seventh century with the arrival of Buddhism in Japan. Among the various religious practices that were adopted at that time was the custom of offering flowers to the Buddha. However it was only in the fifteenth century that Ikebana became a distinctive art form, independent of Buddhism. In studying this development, the role of symmetry is significant.

In traditional Ikebana, as practiced since the seventh century, the main flower stem was set vertically in the center of the vase, with two additional stems placed symmetrically to the left and right. This style called “rikka” or standing flowers is still practiced in Buddhist temples today. In the fifteenth century, in what may be considered the result of Japanese aesthetic sense responding to formal Buddhist traditions, a new asymmetric\*\*

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\*\*The term “dissymmetry” may be applied in this case. “Dissymmetry is a small distortion of symmetry, the lack of some elements of symmetry.” However, we shall dare to use the word “asymmetry” instead to better illustrate the contrast of the two different flower arranging. Please see Professor Dénes Nagy’s paper for further explanation on dissymmetry. “The Western Symmetry and the Japanese Katachi Shake Hands: Interdisciplinary Study of Symmetry and Morphological Science” (*Proc. of KUS*, 1994, U of Tsukuba, pp. 27–46).



Fig. 1. Rikka, standing flowers, a folding screen of 17C. From “Sogetsu Curriculum” ed. H. Teshigawara, Sogetsu-Shuppansha, p. 246, 1994.

style of Ikebana appeared. By the end of the eighteenth century, this style became more sophisticated with diverse placement angles and the varying lengths of branches. The asymmetry of the new art form differentiated it decisively from earlier forms of flower arrangement. Independent of the religious context of offering flowers, Ikebana had gained its position as a distinct Japanese art.

## 2. Symmetry and Asymmetry in Flower Arrangement

One of the most striking differences between Ikebana and Western style flower arrangement is in their shape. While Ikebana is thoroughly asymmetric, Western flower arrangement stresses symmetry. The contrast is obvious, but the origin and significance of this distinctiveness is not clear. As the religious element in flower offering and decoration has been of major importance, a discussion of the religious background of these two forms of flower arrangement may bear some fruit.

As mentioned earlier, the asymmetric style of Ikebana is partially the result of the peculiar commingled religious environment of Shinto and Buddhism found in Japan. Shinto, the indigenous Japanese religious tradition that predates Buddhism, views nature as the dwelling place of the “kami”, the deities of Japan. Though the number of these “kami” is said to be eight million, which is to be interpreted as meaning a countless number, no one of them is considered as dominant. Unlike the absolute, almighty God of Christianity or even the central, lordship role of Zeus, one god among many, Shinto has a vast array of “kami” with no definitive leader. This rather fluid sense of cosmic order is partly responsible for the aversion to symmetry in Ikebana.

Doctrines found in Shinto and Buddhist stress the importance of living in harmony with nature, and it is in this unity of human and nature that the art of Ikebana is grounded. Just as nature, according to Shinto principles, is not comprehended as being either symmetrical or having a fundamental geometrical order, Ikebana reproduces this asymmetry by using three main flower stems. The longest thickest stem symbolizes 'heaven', the next longest 'earth', while the shortest represents the human dimension. No stem is placed



Fig. 2. Basic style Ikebana. From "Sogetsu Curriculum" ed. H. Teshigawara, Sogetsu-Shuppansha, p. 44, 1994.



Fig. 3. Basic style Western style flower arrangement (fan shape). From "Flower Arrangement 2" ed. M. Inoue, NHK Gakuen, Dohosha-Shuppan, p. 25, 1993.

vertically. Rather with subordinate stems and flowers, the three main stems in accord create a condensed cosmos. The beauty of Ikebana stands on this idea of the harmonious universe, where human, earth and heaven are in balance.

In contrast, symmetrical Western style flower arrangement developed in the religious environment of Christianity. A faith based on a unique, central figure, God, tends to a certain symmetrical interpretation of the world. After all there can be no symmetry without a center, but once that center is equated with God, then symmetry becomes an ideal.

A good illustration of this preference by European artists for natural symmetry is to be found in the Spanish film, "El Sol del Membrillo". In this movie directed by Victor Erice, an old painter is painting a quince tree in his garden. On the canvas, the tree is drawn at the center and its branches stretch to the right and left evenly. The painter explains that he likes the order that the symmetry produces and that the tree gains in significance and dignity by its central location. It seems as if the aged painter is describing God rather than the tree. The painter, through his representation of symmetry in nature, is also imitating its creator. Western flower arrangement has not lost this ideal during its development and even as an art form today attempts to model itself on the created order.

### 3. The Ideal Garden

If we look at gardens as flower arrangements on a larger scale, a similar difference in the treatment of nature can be discerned as described above. As in Ikebana, Japanese gardens try to mirror the whole of nature incorporating mountain, river, sea, forest and field into its composition. These gardens are chiefly naturalistic plantings of trees and bushes, and few flowers are to be seen. Japanese gardens have a random, seemingly untamed and haphazard quality, and so are necessarily asymmetrical.

The ultimate example of the untamed garden can be found in the eleventh century Japanese classic "The Tale of Genji". The protagonist Hikaru is attracted to the princess Sue-tsumu-hana's garden. Although it is overgrown with grass, utterly neglected and dilapidated, it appeals to his sympathy and taste. Japanese gardens endeavor to recreate the harmonious, yet entangled and mysterious world of nature.

Artistic appreciation of gardens in Europe tends to emphasize order and refinement and an untended garden may well give cause for fear. In "Hamlet", the following lines appear: "Fie on't, ah fie, 'tis an unweeded garden/ That goes to seed; things rank and gross in nature/ Possess it merely. That it should come to this!" The dilapidated Sue-tsumu-hana's garden would be similarly condemned as something vile.

Continental gardens are usually well ordered, symmetrical and may even be described as disciplined. Colorful flowers in full bloom in perfect array are the highlights of such gardens. Famous examples such as Versailles and Tivoli can be found throughout Europe, gardens which seem to affirm the existence of a central, absolute Being.

### 4. Materials

As the final shape of a flower arrangement is necessarily closely connected with the materials from which it is made, it is important to consider the materials used. One of the characteristics of Ikebana is the use of branches and twigs, in addition to flowers. This

usage reflects the appreciation for trees in Japanese culture. Trees are paradoxically symbolic of both age and death, as well as of evergreen life. This juxtaposition of symbols is clearly evident in the Japanese folktale “Hanasaka Jisan” or “The Old Man who made the Trees Blossom”. When an honest old man scatters ashes on lifeless cherry trees, blossoms suddenly burst out into full bloom. The hero is aged and the trees seem to be withered, but when they are joined new life is born. In the eyes of our distant ancestors, trees must have appeared to have died in winter and then to revive in spring with new shoots and flowers. Thus a tree represents not only life, but also age and mortality.

This symbolic combination of life and death appeals to the Japanese sense of beauty. There is a good example of this in the “Sanka-shu”, the collected poems of Saigyō, a twelfth century ‘waka’ poet and Buddhist priest. It reads “If possible, I would like to die under a flower-blossomed cherry tree in spring on a full-moon night.” The great symbolic wealth attached to trees and so to their twigs and branches, is certainly a key reason for their use in Ikebana and its attempt to represent the condensed cosmos.

In Western flower arrangement, flowers in bud or in full bloom are the key components and so the youth, love, life and beauty that they symbolize become the theme of the total arrangement. References to such qualities of flowers are endless in Western literature, especially in reference to what may be referred to as the quintessential flower, the rose. Robert Burns famously rhapsodises “My love is like a red, red rose, that’s newly sprung in June.” And in “The Little Prince”, Saint-Exupéry’s modern parable, the prince speaks of his favourite rose and how he cares for it. The beautiful rose stands straight and proud under a glass cover, the prototypical flower arrangement with one tall stemmed flower in the center. The young boy, the hero of the narrative, and the rose together represent life, youth and a steadfast love.

## 5. Cycle of Life and Death

The composite Japanese religious context and the aesthetic sense that this has given birth to, have molded Ikebana during its development. Certainly the Buddhist concept of the cycle of life, leading from life through death to life again repeatedly, influenced the introduction of ‘dead’ branches into Ikebana. As in ‘Hanasaka Jisan’, the tree is symbolic of both life and death and the cycle leading from one to the other. A further example of this can be found in the Russian film “The Sacrifice” directed by Andrei Tarkovsky. In the opening scene a man and his son plant a tree together. As their work progresses, the father tells his son, who has lost the power of speech, a Buddhist story, though in the film it is changed into a Russian Orthodox story. He speaks of a monk who practiced asceticism by watering a dead tree on a mountain everyday until one day it suddenly returned to life. This story encourages the boy to water everyday the weak-looking tree, which his father has named ‘Ikebana’. By the end of the movie the son begins to talk and it is implied that the tree has started flowering.

The two stories point to the cycle of life and death for all living things. Ikebana attempts to give artistic expression to this fundamental Buddhist concept. An old twisted limb of a pine tree, a moss covered branch, a spray of maple leaves, a stalk of bamboo or a dried lump of driftwood are all used in Ikebana and are representative of both trees and their symbolic connection with the cycle of life. The art of Ikebana is to recreate a micro-



Fig. 4. Ikebana representing the cycle of life and death. From "Ikebana Sogetsu" ed. H. Kaido, Sogetsu-Shuppansha, No. 135, p. 31, 1981.

cosmos, where all of nature coexists in harmony. This unity requires the use of part of a tree to symbolize the cycle of life and death, an essential element in the Buddhist cosmos.

Life is emphasised and celebrated in Western style flower displays, because the flowers that symbolize life, love and beauty are mainly used. At the end of the story of "The Little Prince", it is hinted that even though he has died, his body does not remain on earth. Rather, as the narrator grieves, he tells us to wait for the little prince's return; an obvious reference to the Christian belief in resurrection. Every human being has to go through death to be reborn once and for all. In this created order, life and death are not part of a cycle, but form part of a linear progression that leads us beyond this world. Death does not lead us back to this world, so death does not become the complementary counterpart of life in the great cycle as perceived in Buddhism. Flowers in full bloom signify the full life that God has granted to all creatures, and the praise that the creator is due from creation.

## 6. Conclusion

Ikebana, as discussed earlier, is a concentrated presentation of the cosmos, but in quite a different way it can also be considered a concentrated presentation of the Japanese aesthetic sense. There is a religious component to this, and the influence of theological concepts is apparent in the development of Ikebana. The asymmetrical, yet harmonious world of Shintoism, the cycle of life and death of Buddhism and, the unique commingling of these religions, are made visible in this floral art. Even though Western flower arranging is hardly deemed an art, it too physically presents certain theological currents of its religious environment. As the creature models itself on its creator, so symmetrical order and fullness of life are key elements in a floral decoration. The beauty of the flowers enhanced by their symmetrical display reflects the spirit of life within each person and the praise to God for this gift.

In this rather impressionistic approach to the question of symmetry and asymmetry in Ikebana and Western flower arrangement, we have emphasized the contrast between them to highlight their respective religious backgrounds. Of course they are not opposites, and have begun to influence each other greatly. Neither are they static, unchanging art forms, and so the cross-pollination between them is producing new floral expressions, which in a non-verbal manner combine very different religious traditions.

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