

## The Japanese Art of Arranged Flowers

### Keiji Nishitani

I once read a newspaper article to the effect that the existential philosopher Sartre was interested in the Japanese art of ikebana, "arranged flowers." The article was a brief one and it did not give the reason for his interest in it, but I felt I had some idea why. I recalled the impression I myself had upon seeing ikebana with new eyes when I returned to Japan from study in Europe ten or so years ago.

My study abroad lasted only two-and-a-half years, but by the time I had to return home I had become accustomed to life in Europe. And so, upon my return I saw many things with something of a foreigner's eye. Being in such a state of mind, I was particularly struck by the beauty of ikebana in houses I visited. No matter how accustomed we may be to seeing something, after not seeing it for awhile our curiosity is reawakened and we are made to see it anew. This is a common enough occurrence, but on occasions one's eyes might even be stuck open in amazement. Seeing ikebana again was one such experience for me.

While in Europe, I had gone to see as many works of art as I could, not only in the large cities but in small towns and villages as well. There I found art which had been made by techniques handed down for generations, and it possessed a real refinement and sense of composure. But I realized in ikebana something entirely different from the whole ethos of European art.

First of all, the beauty expressed in ikebana is created to last only for a short time. Such art changes with the season and reveals its beauty only for the few days after the flowers and branches have been cut. It is, by its very nature, something temporary and improvised. The essential beauty lies precisely in its being transitory and timely. It is a beauty which embraces time, a beauty which appears out of the impermanency of time itself. People who arrange flowers understand this. The pleasure found in creating such beauty might even be in proportion to its temporal character.

Of course it is true that all art has some kind of life expectancy. Even the great cathedral at Cologne, and Saint Peter's—all things in the world eventually perish. And yet buildings, sculpture, paintings, and so forth, are all made to withstand this thing called time. Ignoring the change wrought by time and desiring to remain no matter what, these works of art manifest a will to endure. Perhaps this desire or will to endure is present in the artist's urge to produce, and so we find it reflected in the work of art.

Ikebana and the mind of the artist reflected in it are of a completely different character. Instead of trying to deny time while in the midst of it, ikebana moves along in time without the slightest gap. It is like the legend of Senjo sick in bed and at the same time gone away, or like breathing naturally during zazen so that the inhalation and exhalation become as one and the person thoroughly identifies with his existence in time.

The art of ikebana is wholly encompassed in the cutting and arranging of flowers and branches. The difference between ikebana and the other plastic arts is not simply that with ikebana the

artist works with material just as it is found in nature; that is merely a superficial difference. The essential difference lies in the cutting of the flowers and branches.

A tree or blade of grass growing naturally out of the ground also shows a mode of being which tries to deny time while in the midst of it. It resists the pull within itself working to bring about its own cessation, as if it were trying to get ahead of time, continually going beyond itself, forging ahead of itself. But it cannot transcend time in this way because its existence is in time to begin with. In trying to deny time or get ahead of it, the tree or grass is itself a temporal existence continually changing. In trying to deny time, it is alive and can exist (albeit in time). Its existential possibility is realized in the gravitational field. It is fighting a losing battle with itself. The tree or grass is giving itself to the sunlight, rain and wind, to the nutrients and insects in the soil. This giving is also a part of its struggle to live. All of this is nothing but a way of trying to deny time. Trees and grass naturally growing out of the earth are like this.

And not only trees and grass, but people as well—all natural life is so. Plato said that all living things seek eternity in this changing world through procreation, but even here we can find the same attempt to deny time while in the midst of it. The life of the artist and his urge to produce mentioned above is the same as the life of natural things. Art belongs to the world of man and his culture, and is different from simple nature. But life in art has its fundamental source in the life of nature. It was Goethe who realized that artistic creativity is based on natural productivity, that it is alive and is the same as all life, and that its essence is the will or desire to deny time while in the midst of it.

Ikebana is a severing of this very life of nature. Flowers in the field or garden pollinate in order to procreate. This is part of the natural will or desire of life. The arranged flower has had this will or desire cut off. It is rather in the world of death, poised in death. It has become severed from the life which denies time, and has itself entered time and become momentary.

While the life of nature has temporality as part of its essence, it goes against and conceals that essence. Nature exists as if it were trying to slip away from time. On the other hand, the flower with its roots cut off has, in one stroke, returned to its original, essential fate in time. This is not the life of a flower in nature. The flower cannot do this by itself. It is merely man's caprice to force the flower against its natural will or desire. The flower is thus made to stand poised in its hidden essence, to reveal that essence.

From the perspective of their fundamental nature, all things in the world are rootless blades of grass. Such grass, however, having put roots down into the ground, itself hides its fundamental rootlessness. Through having been cut from their roots, they are, for the first time, made to thoroughly manifest their fundamental nature—their rootlessness. To be shifted from the world of life into the world of death is, for the flower, a kind of transcendence. The flower made to stand upon death has been cut off from the constructs of time that occur in life, and it is just as though it stands in the timeless present; its evanescent existence of several days becomes a momentary point in which there is no arising or perishing. The flower is shifted to this transcendent moment and fixed there. It becomes a temporary manifestation of eternity that has emerged in time.

Death in which life has been severed, or nothingness (*mu*) in which the possibilities of existence have been cut off—this is not a mere natural death. The natural death of flowers lies in withering and decaying, and arranged flowers must be thrown out before they wither. The death of flowers that have been severed while living transcends the life of nature, transcends the constructs of time, and signifies a movement into new life as a moment. This nothingness is the attainment of new possibilities of existence as a temporary manifestation of eternity within time. Probably the person who arranges the flowers senses these things, either consciously or unconsciously—for example, when he or she places them in the tokonoma and gives them the space they are to dominate. Within that space, the flowers exist with solemnity, floating in emptiness, just as though they have emerged from nothingness. The space about them, the space of the entire room, is drawn taut by the existence of the flowers, just as if it had received a charge of electricity, and the air takes on a tension and gravity. The flowers, through the certainty with which they occupy the space, sweep clear the atmosphere. The flowers themselves, however, have no awareness or intention of doing this. The sweeping clear of the air about them is the response of the space of nothingness (it is for this reason that arranged flowers, by their fundamental nature, require a setting like the tokonoma). The flowers are simply there, in their correctness. While sending forth a faint coolness from within a fathomless composure—like a person who has eradicated all attachments to life and abandoned all the expectations fundamental to our mundane existence—through a complete silence they communicate that which is eternal.

I have been talking about the character of beauty in ikebana. Being completely momentary, it is an improvisational art. The beauty of ikebana changes with the seasons and with the temporal existence of the plants. The beauty of ikebana is one that vanishes after only a few days, and yet it can be created easily. Such beauty is momentary and yet it is as if that momentariness is transformed into a beauty of a higher order. The essence of the plant being turned into art lies in the aforementioned activity of cutting the plant. With this activity, the emptiness (*ku*) which lies hidden in the depths of the plant is unveiled. It can even be said that the plant itself, in being empty, is the appearance of eternity in time. This momentariness of a higher order expresses eternity. Time itself, in being completely temporal, becomes an eternal moment. With the activity of cutting, emptiness is unveiled in the depths of existence, and the eternal moment is realized.

With this realization, one enters a completely different dimension in which art is of two possible kinds. One is an art directly in life, and the other is an art alive in death. In other words, one kind of art seeks eternity by denying temporality, and the other tries to unveil eternity by being thoroughly temporal. The former arises out of the natural will or desire of life, and the latter arises out of emptiness which has severed that natural will or desire.

Many Japanese arts, particularly those influenced by Zen, belong to the latter—for example haiku, waka poems, the noh theater, the Way of Tea, and perhaps ikebana as well.

One of the great strengths of many pure Japanese arts is that their creative activity is not limited to the professional but is taken up by the common people. Therefore, this creative activity is connected to the daily life of the people. [T. S.] Eliot said that culture is not just the thought and art of so-called chosen people of culture; it is life and even includes daily life and its activity. I

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agree completely, but in the case of the Japanese arts of which I speak here, it is not even limited to that. The activity of everyday life is itself connected with art and is equal to the arts of the chosen people of culture. And it is this that is found in the Way of Tea and ikebana. There are no other arts like these. If this can be elucidated, the unique character of Japanese art can be seen from a new and different angle.



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