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Abstract
*Shibumi*, a Japanese term referring to a subtle elegance, but at times suggestive of austerity or even bitterness, captures a certain sense of restraint that is reflected in much traditional Japanese design. Although concepts derived from Japanese Zen Buddhism, such as *ma*, *wabi-sabi*, and *iki*, may be more commonly known to English-speaking audiences, this article proposes that *shibumi* is the more appropriate concept to apply when considering the minimalist nature inherent in much Japanese design. Moreover, this article suggests that *shibumi* and modernist design tastes may be compatible, despite past suggestions to the contrary. To support this viewpoint, I point to evidence in the ongoing design trends in Japanese design that continue to embrace several of the ideals of twentieth-century modernist design.

Key Words
aesthetic appreciation; Naoto Fukasawa; Elizabeth Gordon; Japanese; Mingei; minimalism modernist design; Dieter Rams; *shibui, shibumi, wabi-sabi,* Soetsu Yanagi

1. Introduction

Although there are ongoing points of difference regarding the role of beauty in aesthetics, much of the work on aesthetics continues to address the nature of beauty, both in the natural and artifactual world.[1] Aesthetic experiences from a Japanese perspective are somewhat different from Western cultures in that they elevate both restraint and the transient as admirable qualities, and from these characteristics, a sense of beauty can
emerge.[2] Understatedness is a quality of much of the art and design of Japan, in an historical sense and in the modern era. This article discusses the underlying ideas from Japanese Zen Buddhism that drive a seemingly intuitive preference towards minimalist forms, a preference evident in traditional artifacts and also in contemporary art and design. I propose that the term ‘shibumi,’ originally referring to gustatory bitterness or astringency, but now broadly referring to a subtle elegance, with an occasional sense of austerity, best encapsulates this preference. How this preference can be considered concerning modernist design, which often advocates a minimalist approach, is also discussed.

2. Traditional minimalism meets modernist design

In recent years, Japanese evangelists of lifestyle minimalism, such as Marie Kondo and Fumio Sasaki, have gained prominence among Western audiences.[3] They have taught us that having too much stuff in your home is a poor state of affairs. Unless an object is one for which you have a high level of affection (“sparking joy,” as Kondo says), it is apparently of no value and ought to be discarded. Declutter your home, and you will declutter your thinking. If the popularity of recent books and television shows are any indication, the material minimalist perspective is increasingly being embraced by a significant number of people outside of Japan. Why is such minimalism advocated by these Japanese arbiters of taste? In this section, I examine two possibilities from the Japanese aesthetic tradition.

The Zen Buddhist concept of ma, usually translated as space, gap, or negative space, is often stated as the philosophical underpinning of what many in the West see as Japanese minimalism.[4] It is said that ma suggests an interval between the elements in environmental design, such as those in rock garden landscapes (karesansui, Figure 1).[5] Citing a poem by contemporary Japanese architect Arata Isozaki, Takahiko Limura describes how ma works in the experience of a rock garden:

The garden can be regarded as both a medium and an environment—‘Perceive—Blankness,’ ‘Voice—Silence,’ ‘Void—Fill;’ employing pairs of contrasting concepts, Isozaki tried to juxtapose the negative and the positive. This is not an obliteration of the negative by the positive; on the contrary, it not only admits the existence of the negative space, but it also “fills into” the positive without turning the negative into the positive. [6]
Ma brings a viewer’s attention to the spaces between objects as much as the objects themselves, affirming “the power and meaning of intervals and gaps in time, space, and being... [that] reveal a rich reality of presence and place.”[7] It serves environmental design in several ways conducive to a minimalist aesthetic: “the importance of openings, bridging spaces, form defining space rather than space serving form, simplicity, asymmetry, flowing/changing forms, and so forth.”[8] Beyond rock gardens, there are instances in Japanese art and design broadly where this concept of negative space may be applicable, such as painting or calligraphy or perhaps, more recently, in the arrangement of graphical elements, as shown in Figure 2.[9]

Figure 2: Much contemporary Japanese graphic design has a tendency to use ample negative space and wide letter-spacing. (a) Tee-shirt design of Kanji saying “Hokuriku” (a region in northwest Japan), with a simple map of the coastline. Design by Daijiro Ohara. Photograph by the author. (b) The orange Kanji characters in the top left (saying “Kyoto”) are stretched to accentuate the spaces within. Original prototype by the author.

But the view of ma does not convincingly account for why so many, though certainly not all, Japanese design artifacts, from
traditional lacquerware soup bowls and ceramic teacups (yunomi, Figure 3) to modern robots like Honda’s ASIMO and products from design company Muji, like Naoto Fukasawa’s CD player (Figure 4), exhibit minimalist tendencies.[10] Taken as solitary standalone objects, these examples all exhibit a certain refinement or subtlety through a minimalism that does not necessarily rely on the negative space commonly associated with ma. Fukasawa’s CD player, for example, when presented on an empty wall of negative space as in Figure 4, could be considered an example of ma. But the concept of ma does not explain why Fukasawa chose a light gray exterior, with a simple form and few buttons that offer only the most basic functionality for his design object.

Figure 3: A simple Japanese ceramic teacup, referred to as yunomi. Photograph by the author.
Another set of concepts in Japanese aesthetics that may account for minimalism in Japanese design is *wabi-sabi*. *Wabi-sabi* is considered a prominent aspect of Zen Buddhist aesthetics.[11] Beginning around the sixteenth-century as a reaction against more ostentatious Chinese artforms of the time, *wabi-sabi* is derived from Zen Buddhist thinking as a focus on simplicity and an acceptance of imperfection.[12] The term consists of two separate words: *wabi*, referring to rustic simplicity and austerity, and *sabi*, which suggests rust, an antique look, but can also imply loneliness.[13] As a combination, the term *wabi-sabi* embraces the handmade and rustic, accepting decay and impermanence as natural processes that should be celebrated rather than fought against, a trait that makes it something of an antithesis to modernism and consumer culture.[14]

Although there has been debate as to how many of Japan’s arts are historically a result of Zen thought, *wabi-sabi* continues to influence design in the modern world.[15] Its influence has been noted in the work of fashion designers such as Issey Miyake and Rei Kawakubo.[16] Miyake’s works, for example, often feature a rough and rugged appearance and the use of organic shapes and asymmetrical designs. Architects Tadao Ando and Kengo Kuma have also acknowledged *wabi-sabi* in their works. Ando named one of his works “*Wabi* house,” while Kuma blends traditional, raw materials, such as bamboo as a structural element, with modern materials, calling his approach a “new kind of *wabi-sabi*.”[17]
However, one complication of wabi-sabi visual aesthetics is that an intuitive awareness may only be acquired after a significant amount of effort is devoted to them, the results of which are highly refined objects of the art world. Such an awareness does not necessarily apply in appreciating the beauty of everyday designed objects. The objects of modernist design are also part of our everyday lives and generally not those associated with artistic activities. Yuriko Saito has made this observation:

I am somewhat skeptical about the wabi aesthetic mentality’s efficacy in facilitating the acceptance and celebration of human predicament. The reason is this. I believe that cultivation of this aesthetic sensibility is certainly possible and has been accomplished by a number of people who derive aesthetic pleasure from the tea ceremony implements, tea huts, meagre food served there, poems with desolate tone, and the like. However, these items are all experienced within the sphere of artistic activities, not as part of our everyday life.[18]

There is also a paradox in considering several objects, such as those of the tea ceremony or lacquerware, as representative of the wabi-sabi aesthetic, when these examples are highly refined to the point of near-perfection.[19] Wabi-sabi aesthetics are said to promote imperfection, decay, and a rustic nature, often through the creation of handmade artifacts that use natural materials. While these rustic, imperfect aesthetics may be a welcome respite in a world of machine-made artefacts, wabi-sabi alone does not account for why so many modernist design objects in Japan are minimalist in nature. Modernist design objects are also highly refined to the point of near-perfection, yet feature no signs of the rust or decay inherent in the wabi-sabi aesthetic. Neither are these design objects within the sphere of artistic activities noted above by Saito, as they are everyday objects that feature in the homes of millions of people in Japan and abroad.[20] Wabi-sabi, as expressed through the high-end, refined artforms of the Japanese tea ceremony, is essentially an aesthetic of transience.[21]

3. Shibumi and modernism

A sense of subtle elegance is captured in the Japanese word shibui (adjective) or shibumi (noun), terms usually translated as elegant, austere, refined, and simple, but also bitter and astringent.[22] In many instances shibumi suggests a quiet sense of taste and can apply to food and drink in addition to design and art. It is my view that shibumi is likely related to the sabi portion in the term wabi-sabi, as sabi can refer to “elegant simplicity.”[23] Usage of the term can be traced back to the Muromachi period (1333–1568), with an unripe persimmon considered a classic example of the quality in this period.[24]
Japan scholar Donald Richie (1924–2013) noted that modern-day usage of the term implied “the use of subdued colors, simple patterns, singers with unostentatious deliveries, actors who blended with the ensemble,” and recounted an anecdote where a stranger in Japan complimented his muted dark brown-green tie as being *shibui*.[25] A somewhat related concept, *iki*, has also gained some prominence in the English-speaking world. *Iki* is often used to suggest something analogous to *chic*, stylish or elegant.[26] While some objects may exhibit qualities of both *iki* and *shibumi*, the latter implies something more subtle and humble, and not necessarily fashionable or stylish.[27] Knowing that there is a subtle elegance to be found in the subduedness of *shibumi* was initially seen as a sense of sophistication, in contrast to more colorful, showy items that were more easily appreciated by the masses. Although this may also imply a sense of elite tastes, the term usually applies to everyday objects and is a part of the general lexicon.[28]

An internet image search of the terms ‘*shibui* or ‘*shibumi*,’ and ‘design’ or ‘products’ in Japanese, will bring up an enormous range of design artifacts: smartwatches and smart-phone covers, clothing, wallets and bags, electric guitars, bicycles and motorcycles, and shelving units. These search results consist primarily of contemporary objects, surprisingly few that could be considered objects of traditional Japanese culture. The modernist design work of Japanese designers Naoto Fukasawa (Figure 4, above), Hiroshi Seki, and Yohei Kuwano (Figure 5, below), including electronics and furniture, has also been described as *shibumi*, as has modernist architecture of the post-war period.[29] Research also suggests that the term can be applied to everyday contemporary Western fashion, such as denim jeans.[30] It is fair to say that many of these design artefacts would be considered contemporary rather than traditional design objects of Japan. This result suggests that *shibumi* can apply equally to objects both old and new, the high-end and practical everyday objects of both Japan and other countries, and that a Japanese sense of minimalism is as relevant to contemporary design as it has been to designs of the past.[31] It is worth noting, however, that there is a lack of evidence of designers showing clear intention to create a *shibumi* experience, but it is the users of design artefacts that point to the *shibumi* qualities.[32]
Soetsu Yanagi (1889–1961), the founder of the Japanese Mingei (folk crafts) movement (1923–present day), suggests that the sense of shibumi explains a uniquely Japanese approach to beauty:

I still think that there is probably no country like Japan whose people live in surroundings composed of specially chosen objects. Behind it all is undoubtedly some sort of educated taste or standard of beauty. Of course, some aspects may be shallow or mistaken, but in any case, things are chosen according to some standard. This may be something as simple as shibui or shibumi (simple, subtle, and unobtrusive beauty), a concept which has permeated all levels of Japanese society. It is hard to tell to what extent this simple word has safely guided the Japanese people to the heights and depths of beauty.[33]

Yanagi contends that the aesthetic understanding of shibumi permeates all levels of society and timelessly guides the tastes of Japanese people, regardless of the fashions of the day:

Even people of the flashiest sort know in the back of their mind that shibumi is a class above them... It contains something that resides outside of time, a truth that is always new and fresh. It harbours a deep Zen significance.[34]

Putting Yanagi’s arguments about the universality of Japanese people’s aesthetic judgments aside, the shibumi aesthetic tends to be associated with older designs, for example, Figure 3, above.[35] Yanagi considers shibumi, like wabi-sabi, to be an
awareness of the Zen Buddhist concept of *muji*, meaning “no ground,” referring to something that is “plain, solid-colored, and un-patterned,” yet comes from “the highest level sensibility.”[36] Beyond simply an appreciation of the visual characteristics noted by Ritchie, this awareness is “an expression of the limitless existence (*yu*) that is encompassed by the void of *mu*.”[37] This void is why Japanese philosophy rooted in Zen is occasionally referred to as a “philosophy of nothingness.”[38]

Zen claims that all things arise from this nothingness, including, potentially, the God whom Abrahamic religions credit for creating everything in the universe:

*Sûnyata* [a Sanskrit term] or nothingness in Zen is not a “nothing” out of which all things were created by God, but a “nothing” from which God himself [also] emerged. According to Zen, we are not creatures of God, but manifestations of emptiness... Although this groundlessness is deep enough to include even God, it is by no means something objectively observable.[39]

That we all arise from the same nothingness as all other things requires a certain amount of humility on our part, according to Yanagi: “Before we begin to express our thoughts, we first have to listen to what the object has to say. In our appreciation and awareness of beauty, we must first of all rein in our tongue.”[40]

Although the majority of modern Japanese people may not be openly practicing Zen Buddhists, the remnants of this restraining influence in both Japanese culture and many of the objects it produces remain strong in the current age.[41]

Whether *shibumi* can be a relevant aesthetic response to modern objects may be a somewhat controversial view. Elizabeth Gordon (1906–2000) was the editor of *House Beautiful* magazine for more than twenty years and a friend and colleague of the architect Frank Lloyd-Wright (1867–1959). Gordon was among the first to introduce the concept of *shibumi* to an English-speaking audience.[42] She was emphatic that the *shibumi* aesthetic could not apply to objects of the modern age (1960):

> Very few modern things can be said to be *shibui*. Modern design is too new a point of view to have developed the depths necessary for *shibusa*. Anyway, the modern movement has put too high a value on the machine-made look. *Shibusa* is humanistic and naturalistic, and the opposite of mechanistic. For this reason, it has nothing whatever to do with the “less is more” thinking of *Bauhaus* and “The International Style.” *Shibusa* is organic simplicity producing richness. It is not denial and austerity, for it is developed to the hilt.[43]

In my view, time has shown that Japanese *shibumi* tastes are, in fact, compatible with modernist design, and one could argue
that in the decades preceding and following Gordon’s above statement, modernist design did produce works of great depth.

Japan quickly embraced the modernist movement early after its inception. Concepts from the *Bauhaus* (1919–1933), a German art school that trained students in architecture, product design, graphic design, and photography were enormously popular in Japan from the 1930s onward. The *Bauhaus* explicitly embraced the industrial aesthetics of the machine, as did the modernist product designers who followed in its wake.[44] Takehiko Mizutani (1898–1969) was one of the first Japanese students of the *Bauhaus* and went on to become a professor at the Tokyo University of the Arts.[45] The spread of *Bauhaus* ideas was also aided by Michiko Yamawaki (1910–2000) and Iwao Yamawaki (1898–1987), a Japanese couple who studied for two years at the *Bauhaus* school in Dessau before its closure.[46] On their return to Japan, Iwao designed several buildings in the *Bauhaus* style, in Tokyo and Kamakura, created propaganda for the Japanese government in the lead-up to the Second World War, and both Yamawakis, along with Mizutani and others, hosted exhibitions of *Bauhaus* work after the war.[47] Yūsaku Kamekura (1915–1997), who designed the logo and other branding for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, was also influenced by the *Bauhaus*’ work in graphic design.[48] In more recent years, the Japanese design company Muji even hosted a *Bauhaus* exhibition at its Ginza store in Tokyo, where it boldly exhibited its products directly alongside *Bauhaus* works.[49]

Renowned German product designer Dieter Rams is known to be influenced by Japanese minimalist aesthetics—to the extent that he cultivated a Japanese garden in his home and hosted a commemorative exhibition of his work at Kenninji Temple in Kyoto.[50] Rams, in turn, was highly influential on Japanese product designers, such as Naoto Fukasawa, who acknowledged Rams’ influence on his work.[51] It is worth observing that two of Rams’ design rules are particularly relevant to the aesthetics of *shibumi*:

Good design is aesthetic: The aesthetic quality of a product is integral to its usefulness because products we use every day affect our person and our well-being. But only well-executed objects can be beautiful. Good design is unobtrusive: Products fulfilling a purpose are like tools. They are neither decorative objects nor works of art. Their design should, therefore, be both neutral and restrained, to leave room for the user’s self-expression.[52]

The restrained works of Rams, and those that followed, such as Fukasawa and Jonathan Ive, formerly the principal product
designer at Apple, a company co-founded by Steve Jobs—another Westerner highly influenced by Zen Buddhism—can arguably be considered works of both richness and subtlety on a level comparable to older artefacts described as *shibumi*. Rams’ design rules are also highly in tune with Yanagi’s view of making beautiful things that are made to be used, but while removing anything superfluous.

Austerity, as implied through the term *shibumi*, in aesthetic choices may at first suggest a tip in the balance between form and function firmly in favor of function, and this continues to be an assumption that many modernist designers work with. From a design standpoint, austere aesthetics may imply that emphasis can be placed on functionality, thereby making a designed object more usable, but it is not always that simple; removing features solely for perceived simplicity may reduce the functionality of a designed object. Finding beauty within an object’s form can also promote usability, but the reverse can also be true; perceived usability can also make an object’s form appear more beautiful. These two contrasting views on the roles of beauty and usability are an ongoing debate within the field of interaction design. Therefore, a turn towards the austerity of *shibumi*, while somewhat implying a preference for function over form, is primarily an aesthetic choice on the part of both the designer and the user (where they have a choice, that is), and not one necessarily driven by the desire of a designer to improve usability. Creating simple forms in contemporary design requires a strategic “thoughtful reduction” of functionality to ensure that adequate amounts of utility still remain. By engaging with a product’s users, a designer can methodically undertake this reduction of functionality. Technologist John Maeda states:

> On the one hand, you want a product or service to be easy to use; on the other hand you want it to do everything that a person might want it to do. The process of reaching an ideal state of simplicity can be truly complex, so allow me to simplify it for you. The simplest way to achieve simplicity is through thoughtful reduction. When in doubt, just remove. But be careful of what you remove.

Yanagi proposed that the everyday objects of craftspeople should be utilitarian and since they undertake everyday tasks, these objects should be humble in appearance. Although Maeda and Yanagi describe the reason for simple forms from different perspectives, both of these views support a minimalist tendency that still acknowledges the necessity of functionality. Yanagi states:
The world of utility and the world of beauty are not separate realms. Who is to say that spirit and matter are not one? Since these utilitarian objects have a commonplace task to perform, they are dressed, so to speak, in modest wear and lead quiet lives... They work thoughtlessly and unselfishly, carrying out effortlessly and inconspicuously whatever duty comes their way. They possess a genuine, unmoving beauty.\[61]\n
It is the humility of the objects that Yanagi describes that appears to differentiate the subtle elegance suggested in the term shibumi, and this humility is not necessarily considered from the perspective of Maeda's method of thoughtful reduction, which is careful not to remove fundamental functionality. Yet the two approaches have both resulted in the promotion of restrained, minimalistic forms that acknowledge their everyday purpose.

4. An enduring minimalism

That Japan embraced modernist design so readily in the post-war period of industrialization suggests that there is a degree of flexibility within shibumi tastes and they are consequently compatible with the so-called aesthetics of the machine. It is also worth noting that often valid criticisms of modernist product design and architecture being impersonal, colorless, and sterile may also resonate with the mild sense of bitterness that the term shibumi can sometimes evoke: a bitterness or astringency that may be viewed in a positive light, even as a sign of elegance.\[62]\ For example, what may be considered a lack of color or ornamentation from a critic of Rams' style may be considered a positive trait from the perspective of shibumi, where subdued colors and simple forms are viewed favorably.\[63]\ Nevertheless, it is not my intention to imply that Japan necessarily wholeheartedly embraced the Bauhaus-derived International Style or modernism that Gordon and Lloyd-Wright were so wary of.\[64]\ While Japan has embraced certain aspects of modernist styles in architecture, graphic design, and product design, it has resisted the full forces of globalization by maintaining subtle references to Japanese culture.\[65]\ This is apparent in the work of furniture designer Sori Yanagi (1915–2011; son of Soetsu Yanagi), as it is in the products of Muji, and also the architecture of Tadao Ando and Kengo Kuma, all of whom incorporate traditional forms and objects into their contemporary designs.\[66]\n
Yanagi (Soetsu), writing almost a century before many of the innovations of today, may have foreseen that a future of design may be found in a modernist aesthetic that accounted for shibumitastes:
Since [shibumi] is not a fabricated beauty, it is not lost in the
comings and goings of ephemeral fads. The Japanese sense of
beauty is bolstered by a profound backdrop, something not to
be found in the West. Without doubt, it will contribute to new
cultural developments in the future, for it has the power to
augment the failings of Western culture.[67]

Although Yanagi does not articulate here what exactly he means
by the failings of Western culture, the profound backdrop he
mentions seems to be the tastes Japanese people derive from
Zen Buddhist aesthetics.[68] It is my view that both a traditional
sense of shibumi as Yanagi has described and the minimalist
nature of much modernist design have resulted in the tastes we
see expressed in contemporary Japanese minimalist design. It
may be that the Zen origins of shibumi tastes broadly give
Japanese modernist design a greater sense of subtle elegance,
when compared to more colorful, even ostentatious forms from
both Japan and abroad, because it reflects the older religious-
based attitudes of Japanese culture.[69]

5. Concluding remarks

This article discussed several concepts from Japanese Zen
Buddhism that have gained attention in the English-speaking
world: ma, wabi-sabi, iki, and shibumi. I explained my view that,
of these, it is shibumi that may account for much of what we can
consider to be Japanese design minimalism.[70] Ma seems
mainly applicable to environments, where the spaces between
objects are as important as the objects themselves, while wabi-
sabi may account for a Japanese sense of temporality through
imperfection. Shibumi also lacks the connotations of chicness
inherent in the quality of iki. Shibumi may be an expression of
the sabi part of wabi-sabi, which can imply a simple elegance
but without the connotations of rust or antiquity that sabi can
otherwise suggest. Although Gordon was adamant that a
shibumi aesthetic could not apply to the modernist design of the
twentieth century, I argued against this viewpoint by providing
several examples of where modern items from Japan and
abroad have been described as shibumi by users in Japan. The
positive attitude towards austerity sometimes implied by
shibumi also means that the criticism of modernist design’s
coldness or sterility may not be felt so strongly among the tastes
of Japanese designers and their products’ users.

While a Japanese appreciation of shibumi may not solely explain
the phenomenon of minimalism in much contemporary
Japanese design, the firm embrace of twentieth-century
modernist design principles suggests that its sparse forms did,
indeed, resonate with several of Japan’s more prominent
designers and many of Japan’s consumers. I believe this embrace of modernist minimalism aligns with Yanagi’s somewhat contentious view that the intuitive shibumi tastes within Japanese culture are beyond short-term fads, as modernist design has now existed and often thrived in Japan for the best part of a century. The minimalist objects of modernist design described here capture the same shibumi aesthetics Ritchie and Yanagi both note that the term encapsulates. Personally, I can see the subdued colors, simple patterns, and modesty of shibumi in the works of Rams, Fukasawa, Seki, and Kuwano. Aside from advances in technology that came about during the twentieth century, the main point of difference lies between the designers rather than the objects themselves. These modernist designers, from Japan and abroad, did seek recognition of their work, while the designers of Mingei, who Yanagi was enamored by, wished to remain anonymous—although curiously, the company Muji, for whom Fukasawa, Seki and Kuwano all created designs, describe their overall design ethos as “anonymous.”[71] Nevertheless, my view is that the resultant modernist design objects and the shibumi aesthetics encouraged by Yanagi are highly compatible; modernist design favors form after function, while shibumi aesthetics promotes useful objects with subdued and even austere forms. Stripping back features until an object is down to its simplest form, as implied by Rams’ and Maeda’s principles, has answered Yanagi’s Zen-inspired call to produce objects of humility, perhaps unintentionally in some instances. More specifically, the constraints apparent in much modernist design may be somewhat conducive to producing minimalist objects that, in turn, may warrant a shibumi response from those raised in Japanese culture who interact with them.

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Endnotes


[2] The Japanese word for aesthetics (bigaku) tends to imply the Western approach to the study (gaku) of beauty (bi), dating back to the philosophy of ancient Greece, and it is for this reason that some Japanese scholars prefer the use of the term ‘beauty’ to the term ‘aesthetics.’ (See Kuros in Tractisinsky.) Notwithstanding, as beauty is still one of the principal concerns within studies in aesthetics, and this article is intended for an English-speaking audience, I continue to use ‘aesthetics’ as the term throughout this article. See Kuros (19.12 Commentary by Masaaki Kuros), “Visual Aesthetics,” The Encyclopedia of Human-Computer Interaction, 2nd Ed, https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/book/the-encyclopedia-of-human-computer-interaction-2nd-ed/visual-aesthetics, accessed April 20, 2020.


[5] Japan’s rock gardens bear a strong resemblance to Chinese gardens that were popular among the Sung dynasty’s aristocracy and were only associated with Zen Buddhism from the 1930s. See Robert Sharf, “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism,” History of Religions, 33, 1 (1993), 1-43; ref. on 32.


[9] *Ibid.*, p. 60. While use of negative space in a logo may not be unique to contemporary Japanese graphic design, the use of large amounts of negative space has been embraced by many Japanese graphic designers.


[11] This is not to insinuate that seemingly Zen-derived aesthetics convincingly explain everything about Japanese tastes, nor that all Japanese share the same tastes. I say, “seemingly,” because some researchers state that the Zen appropriation of all prominent art forms in Japan is highly dubious, e.g., Sharf, “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism,” p. 35.


[23] See note 12, point 2, in the second set of definitions at “Sabi,” Jisho.org.


[31] Ibid. Tanahashi suggests the term dassai-kakkoii applies to shibumi objects, implying that they are “unsophisticated cool.”


[34] Ibid., pp. 156-157.


[37] Ibid., pp. 159–160.


[43] Quoted in Monica Penick, _Tastemaker: Elizabeth Gordon, House Beautiful, and the Postwar American Home_ (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), pp. 201-202. The terms _shibusa_ and _shibumi_ are both nouns, so for the discussion here it does not matter which term is used.


[47] _Ibid_. Čapková’s paper offers a comprehensive overview of the Yamawaki’s activities leading up to the Second World War.


[52] Ibid. These guidelines are available in print and online through various sources. However, Rams states them himself in the original German (with English subtitles) in Huiswit’s documentary.

[53] Steve Jobs was very much interested in several Eastern religions and philosophies, particularly Zen Buddhism, which influenced his approach to design. His enduring interest in Zen Buddhism is documented in Brent Schlender and Rick Tetzeli, *Becoming Steve Jobs: The Evolution of a Reckless Upstart into a Visionary Leader* (London: Hachette, 2015), p. 33, p. 144.


[55] The phrase “form follows function” was originally coined by the American architect Louis Sullivan in 1896, but this later became something of a mantra to many modernist designers. The phrase is discussed in historical detail in the chapter, “Utility and Significance,” in Hesket, *Toothpicks and Logos: Design in Everyday Life*, pp. 35-54.

[56] From a design standpoint, simplicity is often seen as a way of removing forms that do not help promote usability. An example supporting this view is John Maeda, *The Laws of Simplicity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006). A contrasting view, which emphasizes that some interfaces are necessarily complex, is in Donald A. Norman, “Simplicity Is Highly Overrated,” *Interactions*, 14, 2 (2007), 40-41.


[58] “Utility and Significance” in Hesket, *Toothpicks and Logos*. This chapter discusses the nuances in the interplay between an object’s forms and its functionality.


[60] Ibid.


[65] Scruton discusses the culturally sterilizing effects of some modernist design in Scruton, “Architects Turned Us All into Citizens of Nowhere.”


[68] Japanese aesthetics such as *shibumi*, according to Yanagi, have an underpinning in Zen Buddhism, e.g., Yanagi, *The Beauty of Everyday Things*, pp. 156-157. It is possible that Yanagi may have been suggesting that modern art and design in the West lacked religious and/or philosophical underpinnings in the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth century, but this is highly speculative. The lack of religious-inspired beauty is a point made by Scruton, which he refers to as “desecration,” e.g., Scruton, *Beauty*, pp. 147-148.

[69] Saito discusses the role of culture and aesthetics in political nationalism and highlights both Zen arts and cherry blossoms in this role during the lead-up to the Second World War. For the sake of brevity and clarity, I did not properly broach this subject

[70] It is worth emphasizing that in this article I did not provide a wide-ranging account of all significant aspects of Japanese philosophy, culture, or design and it should not be considered a comprehensive survey of them. It intentionally ignored the complicated relationship between Japanese Buddhism and Shintō, that, throughout most of their history in Japan, have been syncretized. A comprehensive book on Shintō is Helen Hardacre, *Shinto: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Neither did this article account for the nuances between the dominant Japanese culture and minority cultures, such as Ainu and Ryukyuan cultures. The following text presents an overview of Japan's minority cultures: Michael Weiner, *Japan's Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity* (New York: Routledge, 2009).