

Aesthetics of Austerity in Toda Seiju's Posters

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Abstract:

Japanese Post-modern posters emerged as a powerful medium that captivated the world's attention in the 1980s. Their significance arises from their distinctive aesthetics, designers' attempts to create their own styles, the environment where posters are displayed, and the social and cultural conditions that nurture the creativity of Japanese designers. Among the prominent Japanese designers in the Post-modern poster design field, Toda Seiju is notable for his austerity aesthetics. To find out more, I interviewed him in his Tokyo office on 30 October 2008. This paper sheds light on Toda's aesthetics of subtraction, and how it informs his design practice. Through three case studies, I suggest that Zen philosophy and aesthetics have been incorporated to produce the intended effects in Toda's work, with or without his awareness.

Key words: cultural analysis, Toda Seiju, Japanese Post-modern poster, 'Aesthetics of subtraction'.

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Japanese Buddhism gradually lost its spiritual role in Japanese society. Aside from the academic domain and its practice in the rural area, its current role in most metropolitan areas has been reduced to caring for human death and holding funeral rituals, leading to being negatively called 'Funerary Buddhism' (Covell and Rowe 2004, 246). According to Kitagawa (1965), the decline of Japanese Buddhism is deeply related to historical, cultural, and social, conditions of Japan. Notable problems involve its sluggishness and corruption after years of domination as a national religion before the Meiji Restoration was introduced in 1868, the long-term effects of *Meiji* Government's efforts in deposing Buddhism's profound influence in most aspects of Japanese life, and the elevation *Shinto's* role in Japanese political and cultural landscapes (331). Further, its irrelevance to the needs of the current Japanese society (335), and most critically, the introduction of Materialism from the West. Despite these, I argue Zen aesthetics is deeply rooted, and will continue to be a significant aspect of Japanese post-modern poster design, with or without Japanese designers' conscious awareness. The influence of Zen aesthetics is evident in Toda Seiju's posters, in which a stark austerity is seen as a main message. Through the use of this aesthetics, the discussed posters in this paper had won Toda's fame inside and outside Japan. In particular, the 'Red Lips' and the 'Mysterious woman' were chosen in the list of 'Best 100 Japanese Posters 1945 - 1989' by Tokyo Art Directors Club in 1991.

This paper examines the stark austerity in its Japanese context by discussing austerity in Zen philosophy and art, and the position of Buddhism in Japanese society in the 1980s. I explore the conditions of Japanese economy, culture and society, as together they contribute to the use of austerity aesthetics. This paper also discusses how Toda Seiju (b.1949), one of prominent Japanese Post-modern poster designers, expands on the stark austerity in his aesthetics of subtraction.

The role of Buddhism in contemporary Japanese society is difficult to estimate. After a series of critical attacks from Meiji Government in 1868, and the reappearance of active Christian missions since Japan opened to the West (Andreasen 1998, 39), Japanese Buddhism has gone through a series of significant reforms for survival. By contrast, the integration of Western scholarship into Buddhological studies (Kitagawa 1965, 332 -333), and the establishment of

numerous Buddhist Universities across Japan have elevated Buddhism to an intellectual force, and secured its role in the domain of academic research. In particular, the relentless contributions in the research area of Buddhist scholar Suzuki Daisetz (1870–1966) have promoted Zen Buddhism inside and outside Japan. He also helped establish a tradition of Buddhist scholarship with significant works on Shin Buddhism (Andreasen 1998, 40). On the other hand, problems such as poor organization, the loss of discipline by Buddhist practitioners (Cooke 1974, 19), and the growth of Materialism since the end of WWII, all have significantly changed the way Japanese people live and think. Japanese Buddhism is often seen as a necessity when people are in despairing situations. However, when in good times, many Japanese hardly pay attention to Buddhism. Designer Sugiura Kohei (b.1932) notifies the irrelevance of Buddhism in Japanese society as a whole, and specifically in design profession:

“Despite the decline, Buddhism is still a part of our everyday life. However, Buddhism hardly has any influence on the design field, as 99% of contemporary Japanese designers hardly know anything about it. One reason is that the religion, which requires us to close our eyes to see our inner world, is no longer a part of our everyday life. Another reason is that religious elements are not allowed in the work environment for designers, as only economic elements are” (Sugiura 2008).

I find the above remark disputable, as his term ‘Buddhism’ should be understood as canonical teachings of Buddhism, rather than the aesthetics of Zen, Shingon, or Jōdo. It is possible that many Japanese designers incorporate Japanese Buddhist aesthetics without conscious awareness.

AUSTERITY AESTHETICS IN JAPANESE CONTEXT

In the following discussion, I explore factors that might affect the way Toda and the Japanese appreciate, or conform to, the aesthetics of austerity. In particular, the conditions of Japanese culture and society, and the position of Toda Seiju, in the 1980s. As Zen philosophy and aesthetics focus on the simplicity, humility, and frugality of things, I discuss how these qualities impact on the Japanese’s appreciation of insufficiency and ordinaries.

The 1980s boom in Japan signifies a full shift towards worshipping Materialism, a passion that indicates the Japanese have been Americanized (Toda 2008). Under constant exposure to all forms of vigorous graphic treatments, Japanese consumers hardly have a moment to reflect their minds. That probably was the reason Toda applied austerity aesthetics, as something different to the norm to attract passers by’s attention.

Further, except in the subway areas, poster display is only admitted in advertiser’s own property (Sato 2008). Thus, it is generally pointless for a commercial poster to display a text informing the audience about the advertiser, when it is displayed right in front of the premises (Nguyen 2010).

Using the minimum words in communication and artistic expression probably is seen as a way of life, as well as tradition, of the Japanese. In particular, ambiguity is a key feature in Japanese language, which is evident in the way the subject of a sentence is often omitted. It is also used in poetry to imply the atmosphere and emotional condition that are not precisely stated in a poem (Keene 1969, 295). Similarly, Kurokawa (1979) notifies the importance of intuition in Japanese communication:

“In interpersonal relations the technique of feeling out and intuitively grasping the feelings and thoughts of another person without recourse to words has become a refined art in Japan that is known as haragei, a non-verbal form of communication whose roots lie in the tradition of senuhima as Zeami explained it centuries ago” (8).

The position of Toda Seiju:

Toda Seiju is one of the prominent Japanese poster designers of the 1980s. During that period, Japanese post-modern posters started to gain a worldwide reputation. In particular, Toda's posters won many prestigious awards, such as Grand Prix at International Design Exhibition of France (1990), Special Award at 11th International Poster Biennial, Warsaw (1986), Gold Award at Japan-USA Poster Graphics Exhibition (1984), and Highest Award of Excellence at international Poster Biennial, Lahti (1983). In addition, Toda's works are permanently displayed at 14 Museums around the world, including The Museum of Modern Art New York (MoMA), National Museum of Modern Art Tokyo, National Museum of Oslo, and Warsaw Poster Museum.

Toda (2008) discloses that everyone would like to pay a good price for posters and exhibition invitations came from everywhere providing him an opportunity to start his career as a poster designer. Toda states:

"Japanese posters used to be included in school textbooks, sold at auctions overseas and thus, commissions came easily. The world had spontaneous interests in them. I designed posters in a way as if my life totally depended on it. I did not allow myself to copy ideas and printing methods of my colleagues. I preferred create something new and beyond people's imagination" (Toda 2008).

Thus, Toda always seeks for new art direction and themes. This tendency urges Toda to seek new aesthetics for his posters, and austerity has been one of his trademarks to differentiate his works from the rest.

Austerity in Zen philosophy and art:

In Zen art, *wabi* (わび) is the aesthetics that celebrates the condition of being insufficient. Suzuki (1970) points out how *wabi* has been developed as an integral part of Japanese culture:

"The cult of wabi has entered deeply into the cultural life of the Japanese people. It is in truth the worshipping of poverty - probably a most appropriate cult in a poor country like ours. Despite the modern Western luxuries and comforts of life which have invaded us, there is still ineradicable longing in us for the cult of wabi. Even in the intellectual life, not richness of ideas, not brilliancy or solemnity in marshaling thoughts and building up a philosophical system, is sought; but just to stay quietly content with the mystical contemplation of Nature and to feel at home with the world is more inspiring to us, at least to some of us" (23).

In the form of empty space, austerity signifies emptiness concept, the heart of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy. The major aim of this concept is emancipating Buddhist practitioners from dualistic thinking – the cause of all human sufferings. Once Buddhist practitioners realize that all phenomena are marked with emptiness - being empty of fixed self, for example, they can treat agony in the same way with pleasure. Further, it was Yoshida Kenkō (吉田兼好 1283-1350), a Buddhist priest who found aesthetic appeal in the insufficiency, as it could stimulate viewers' imagination to respond to any given event. The following thought of Kenkō, which was expressed in his 14th century work, titled *Tsurezuregusa* (徒然草: 'Essays in Idleness'), deeply impacts on the later development in Japanese aesthetics and philosophy:

"How incomparably lovely is the moon... when seen through the tops of the cedars deep in the mountains, or when it hides for a moment behind clustering clouds during a sudden shower... A view of something half-obsured in such a manner is much more alluring than when it is fully exposed" (Kenkō n.d. Keene 1981, 118).

It is notable that Kenkō's work remains as an essential part of the school curriculum ensuring some influence on the young Japanese students, as they will have to answer at least one question on the 'Essay in Idleness' in the university entrance exams (Keene 1981, xxii).

In order to celebrate the state of being insufficient, Japanese people have to abandon what are considered distracting and unnecessary. Zen teaching indicates that in order to see one's own Buddha-nature, Zen practitioners must get rid of complicated thoughts, as they could give rise to delusions.

How austerity is used in Toda's designs

Case study one:

With a sensitive eye of a professional photographer, Toda has developed an aesthetics called 'aesthetics of subtraction' by grounding on the distinctive lighting condition of Japan. 'Aesthetics of subtraction' can be understood as a complete detachment of distraction, and appears to be influenced by Zen philosophy and aesthetics. Using an image on the front cover of a photographic essay titled 'Heian', (平安: 'peace and calmness') as an example, Toda expounds:

"The aesthetics of subtraction in essence means nothing should be added to the nature. In other words, nothing is artificial. I used the lighting condition of a cloudy day to take this photo (titled 'Sunken Hearth', fig 1). In Japan, the light of a cloudy day is the most beautiful as it does not create any shade. In addition, the unvarnished and plain Japanese cypress wood is used to make a sunken hearth, which is a main utensil used for tea ceremony... In this way, you can say 'nothing has been done'" (Toda 2008).

The tearoom's 'Sunken Hearth' theme used in the *Heian* composition is no mere coincidence. A proper tearoom set up in Toda's private home at Aoyama, Tokyo – where I interviewed him - might indicate how Zen culture has had an effect on his way of living and thinking. In addition, the austerity shown in his poster's composition is well calculated. Toda stated, "Because the act of subtraction, as opposed to that of addition, can make things simple to stimulate people's imagination. In fact, this is the very virtue of Japanese spirit of beauty" (Artspacegallery.com n.d.).

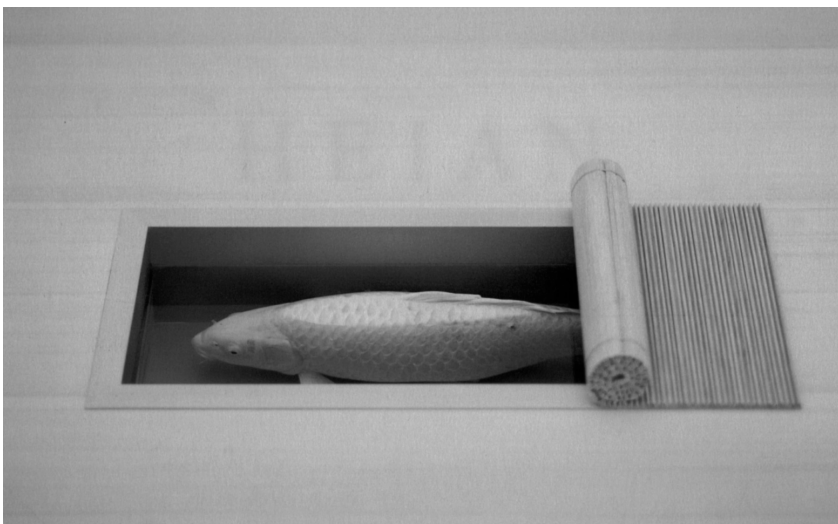


Figure 1: 'Sunken Hearth' (Toda 2003, Front cover)

It is arguable whether the 'Japanese spirit of beauty', which Toda states here is the sensitivity of Zen aesthetics, or it is his own invention. In my opinion, Toda's aesthetics of subtraction reflects Zen aesthetics, as everything is understated to capture the essence of things. His approach creates a sense of ambiguity to the viewers, as definitions of content and form, and text is often

left out in many of his posters. As a result, they deeply engage with viewers in meaning interpretation. Toda states:

“Through the poster’s image, the sponsor’s message is revealed, and I think that is enough. In my view, there should not be fixed meanings in any image. It is up to each individual to interpret the meaning” (Toda 2008).

The message that Toda’s sponsor intended to send is in its expression – probably in the same way Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) argued ‘The medium is the message’ (McLuhan 1973, 15). In the end, it is how a work is depicted that matters. Toda’s aesthetics of subtraction is closely related to that of Zen. Among seven Zen qualities that Hisamatsu (1970) identifies, *Simplicity, Naturalness, Freedom from attachment, and Tranquility* manifest in the *Sunken Hearth* (30-36) (fig 1). Here, Toda places a white carp in a subdued surrounding, expressing a feeling of calmness, an abandon of action and attachment, and a sense of no purpose. This surreal setting suggests a kind of puzzle that in a sense is similar to the purpose of a Zen *koan*. To capture it, viewers must rely on their intuitiveness, rather than rational thinking.

Case study two

For *Vivre21*, a fashion department store in Tokyo, Toda depicted a pair of red lips and a crimson drop trickles down, all placed in an upright position against the stark white background (Fig 2). I wondered if it was Toda’s intention to imply an image of a *yonji*, a symbol of divine procreative energy in Hinduism, or an erotic image, or simply a pair of red lips. Toda (2008) discloses:

“I did not intend to create a female’s genitals – I wanted to place a simple image of a pair of red lips there and thought it would be interesting if the lips were vertical – yet, it turned out erotic at the end... So, I made this image erotic by accident. After all, the female lips set in verticality is symbolically eroticism. Thus, I was glad that people unexpectedly took it that way, even though the poster attracted many complaints from some Feminist groups. At first, my copywriter colleague suggested a text about the mouth, but then the sponsor and I agreed to take it away as the poster would look better without it” (Toda 2008).



Figure 2: Poster for Vivre21 Fashion (Kamekura 1990, 136)

I find Toda's explanation questionable, as without his intention to create something erotic, or at least, provoke some thoughts about it, then why omit all details around the lips, and turn it vertically? Whatever the case, Toda's daring tendency was explicit, as he was glad when some people thought his design erotic.

Less often means more in Toda's art direction. If all details of the face were included; the red lips must have lost their erotic effect and impact. Thus, through the use of omission, Toda subtly suggests a sense of erotic art (*shunga*: 春画), which has been a taboo subject in Japan since the end of the Edo period (1868). The art of *shunga* often depicted the scene of sexual intercourse between a courtesan and her client, in which the private parts of the couple were fully exposed and exaggerated. Through *shunga*, Japanese woodblock prints were called *ukiyo-e*, literally means 'Picture of the fleeting world', a Buddhist expression labeled their everyday life subjects, which nature considered temporal and short-lived. By contrast, the erotic expression of the high class usually focused on enticing sexual desire in a subtle and suggestive way, which was under the influence of haiku poetry. As stated in Buisson (2003), besides having some knowledge of traditional arts, mastering the make-up and wearing the kimono, musical voice and calculated simpering, a *maiko* (a geisha apprentice) must also learn how to sensitively flaunt her sensuality (78). To those who appreciate the art of subtle seduction, nothing can arouse sexual desire more than the image of a youthful *geisha* in which she is half-shy and half-dictating, holding a kimono belt in her mouth implying that her dress is no longer an obstruction. In the same way, through the vertical arrangement and with aesthetics of austerity, Toda's 'red lips' poster entices sexual desire without stepping outside the boundary of Japanese society.

Ambiguity is further enhanced when Toda applies the austerity principle on each element of a poster. It is revealed not only by the starkness of the background, a total whiteness with no other details around the lips, but also the wordless message. By arranging the red lips in an asymmetrical arrangement, Toda (2008) believes that subtleness reflects the Japanese sensitivity and spirit. With a strong focus on the empty space, the relation between form and non-form, asymmetry, and austerity, Zen aesthetics have profoundly imprinted Toda's mind and inspired his creativity.

Case study three:

Figure 3 is one of Toda's masterpieces. Toda (2008) recalls, "I simply told the president of *Vivre21* that I would create a mysterious woman for his campaign". To achieve the mysterious effect, Toda encoded some notable symbolism, such as the ghost-like model and the image of a black ant. In a Japanese movie titled *Ran* (乱: 'revolt'), directed by Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa in 1985, there was a wicked woman called Lady *Kaede* (acted by Mieko Harada). This woman was the mastermind behind the revolts, which destroyed the sovereign state and the three sons of Lord *Hidetora* - the enemy who was responsible for the death of her loved ones, and the destruction of her family's good fortunes. Toda took the concept from the movie putting an enigmatic make-up on a European model. Notably, this kind of make-up is after that of 14th century princesses, in which the female's eyebrows are shaved, and repainted higher on the middle of her forehead in the shape of clouds, so that no emotion could be shown (Buisson 2003, 92-95).

In responding to why the black ant was used, Toda (2008) reveals that the black ant is a fascinating creature. Despite its tiny size, it could be scary. To match up with the treachery of Lady *Kaede* in Akira Kurosawa's movie, this creature is used as it is hardly noticed, fearless, and relentless in pursuing its purposes. Furthermore, Toda (2008) explains that he chose the black ant because it had not been used before.

Toda (2008) believes there is no need for using words in any of his posters. However, if needed a couple of words would be adequate. In this poster, the *Kanji* word *kyukon* (English: ‘bulb’) is positioned on the top left hand side in an arresting way. It is used as one of some hundreds *haiku*’s seasonal words (*kigo*), which connotes springtime (Haiku Poetry n.d.). Toda’s asymmetric arrangement reflects one of the hallmarks of Zen characteristics. Traditionally, Ch’an painters during the Sung dynasty (960-1279), such as Liang K’ai (梁楷), Ma Yüan (马远), and Mu-ch’i (牧谿) often left out a large part of their paintings at either the top left hand side, or right hand side, dividing the painted and unpainted areas not in vertical, but in diagonal line. Although the female model is centrally positioned, a sense of asymmetrical balance is achieved as Toda placed the two groups of text at two diagonal corners.

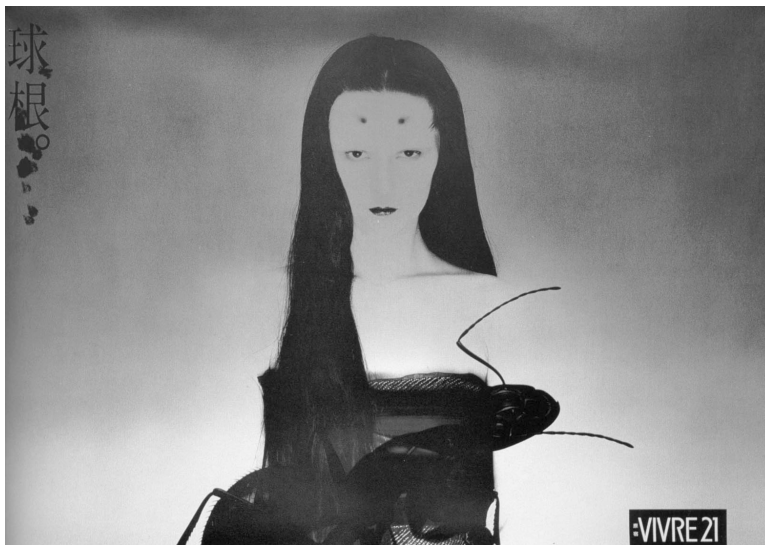


Figure 3: Poster *Vivre21* in 1986 (Kamekura 1990, 139)

The striking feature of this work is the empty space surrounding the female figure. It not only creates a mysterious place, but also merges the figure’s arms to create a perfect dissolve between the form of figure and the empty space. In a sense, this reflects the teaching of the Heart Sutra (Sanskrit: *Prajñā Pāramitā Hridaya Sūtra*), one of prominent Mahayana Buddhist sutras, which states, “Form is emptiness, and the very emptiness is form” (Conze 1983, 162). Moreover, Kurokawa (1979) states that the *Doctrine of the Center* (Sanskrit: *Madhyamaka Sastra*) of Mahayana Buddhism asserts that there is no distinction between existence and non-existence, and both co-exist in the state of emptiness (*kū* 空):

“The concept demonstrates the multi-dimensional quality of Japanese culture, so different from the dualism of Western thinking in which everything is divided into absolute and distinct categories of man vs. technology, man vs. nature, spirit vs. body, black vs. white and so on” (Kurokawa 1979, 8).

In the Japanese art of displaying, the beauty of a lacquer ware can be fully appreciated if is placed in insufficient light. This insufficiency, in turn, helps capture and heighten the audience’s imagination:

“Lacquer ware decorated in gold is not something to be seen in a brilliant light, to be taken in at a single glance; it should be left in the dark, a part here and a part there picked up by a faint light. Its florid patterns recede into the darkness, conjuring in their stead an inexpressible aura of depth and mystery, of overtones but partly suggested” (Tanizaki 2001, 24).

The lack of details in visual art form also suggests an elegant feel of imperfection. Suzuki (1970) signifies the elegance of deficiencies in Zen art:

"In spite of shortcomings or deficiencies that no doubt are apparent, you do not feel them so; indeed, this imperfection itself becomes a form of perfection. Evidently, beauty does not necessarily spell perfection of form. This has been one of the favorite tricks of Japanese artists – to embody beauty in a form of imperfection or even of ugliness" (24).

Toda's poster reflects Zen aesthetic values that Tanizaki and Suzuki point out, and also indicates a profound appreciation of obscurity and concealment in Japanese culture. The deficiency in the form of austerity dissolves the two poles of opposites of a design, such as object and its surrounding, two dimensions and three dimensions, certainty and ambiguity. Thus, through austerity the embodiment of things is more complete.

CONCLUSION

I have identified major Japanese conditions that have contributed to the existence of austerity aesthetics in Japanese Post-modern posters. With the introduction of Materialism from the West and the boom of the 1980s, the lifestyle and thinking of Japanese people have changed remarkably. Being constant exposed to forceful graphic treatments, austerity has emerged as a visual trick to make a poster stand out from the ordinary rowdiness. The regulation on poster display is also another factor, which facilitates an environment where austerity can function without rivalry (Sato 2008). In this context, aesthetics of austerity has been applied as a signature of some of Toda's notable works, particularly with the 'Sunken Hearth', the 'Red Lips' and the 'Mysterious Woman'. These posters are not necessarily the depiction of Toda's entire works however; I chose them for the reason that they reflect the influence of Zen philosophy and aesthetics. Toda's aesthetics is also manifest in the way words are used in an economical way in the 'Mysterious Woman' poster, in which the only word *kyukon* is used to connote the spring season. In an extreme way, words are omitted in the case of the 'Red Lips' to maximize ambiguity.

Originally, austerity has been utilized to assist Zen practitioners in realizing one's own Buddha-nature and the emptiness concept, the core of Zen teaching. Although Japanese Buddhism's position has been weakened since the end of WW II, Zen philosophy and aesthetics implicitly influence Toda's intellect and creativity. Toda applies aesthetics of austerity to generate ambiguity, which allows the viewers to engage more in defining his poster's meanings, and stimulates their imagination and emotion.

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