

FORMS
OF
JAPAN
日本
の
形象



FORMS
OF
JAPAN

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PRESTEL
Munich · London · New York



FIRST

Is it possible to discover something characteristic of Japan in forms that constantly change their appearance and expression? In the face of the Western attempt to abstract original forms and to further abstract this abstraction in order to amplify the expression and to continuously emphasise it, it is perhaps justifiable to speak of a Japanese tendency to simplify the essential appearance of the original form, to substantially reduce the number of its basic elements, to shade and to achieve a soft, broad diffusion through overtones and resonating sounds.

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Yuichirō Kōjirō

6 I first saw Michael Kenna's photographs of Hokkaido, snowy landscapes with individual trees, line drawings of fence posts and clouds in the sky above still waters that peter out in the distance. I looked at the photographs and discovered more. Expansiveness. Stillness. Emptiness. Space. Development. Change. Generosity. Reduction. Simplicity. Form.

I began to work with the photographs and toyed with various ideas and concepts. My approach was subjective and, initially, of an exclusively visual nature. I intuitively developed the formal structure and a thematic correspondence to various subjects in Japanese culture. Michael Kenna's photographs were both my inspiration and the object of my increasingly close connection to Japan in terms of both form and content.

This book of pictures is the result. The five chapters – *Sea, Land, Trees, Spirit* and *Sky* – are the central subjects of this book. Each subject transports not only its concrete reality, captured in the photographs, but also corresponds to a specific formal subject:

SEA – Forms of Isolation

LAND – Forms of Strength

TREES – Forms of Transformation

SPIRIT – Forms of Entireness

SKY – Forms of Elusiveness

Form is, for me, a significant characteristic and a basis of many aspects of the Japanese world. In Japan form shapes and penetrates the spiritual climate, as well as the social and the private sphere, interpersonal relations and the behaviour of Japanese people.

The Japanese approach subjects relating to aesthetics intuitively and poetically. Aesthetic messages in Japan are always immediately taken in by all the senses. It is not necessary to explain what one sees or to comment on or interpret it. A deep feeling and understanding, a particularly artistic sense appear to be innate. It is as though the Japanese grasp with their soul that which Westerners must study diligently to acquire.



“Everything, then, is emptiness: you yourself, the drawn sword and the sword-bearing arms. Yes, even the thought of emptiness is no longer present.” “From such absolute emptiness,” Takuan notes, “grows the wonderful development of doing.”

Eugen Herrigel

The Japanese recognise the suggestive power of natural forms and the spiritual symbolism that pervades their surroundings. Zen has played a considerable part in the deepening of the Japanese soul’s aesthetic sensitivity and, finally, in rooting it in a religious intuition that grows from a mystical understanding of nature. Zen has been a great creative power in the artistic, spiritual and even in the political life of the Far East. In some respects it has formed the Japanese character and it is, simultaneously, an expression of this character. The subtle and pervasive influence of Zen can be seen in thoughts and feelings, in art, literature and the behaviour of Japanese people. *Forms of Japan* draws on many of these thoroughly Japanese subjects.

Sea explores the subject of Japan’s geographical location, surrounded by the sea. Isolation plays the role of both form and forming power. The *Land* itself appears to be a symbol of power that repeatedly gives rise to new forms. It is a force for both destruction and preservation. In *Trees* forms of transformation are seen to be a process of constant development. The tree that blossomed the previous year is not the same as the one that blossoms this year. It is a symbol of transience and also of the triumph over the current condition. *Spirit* takes up forms of completeness from various areas of Japanese culture and visualises rituals, reflection, concentration, the quest for perfection. Wholeness is seen as a quintessence of that which went before. In the fifth subject, *Sky*, this in turn appears to dissolve, or dissipate.

Simplicity and plainness are created by empty space. They provide the necessary leeway to be able to absorb a wide variety of thoughts and feelings. It is the same principle that also underlies the world of Japanese myth and communication through emptiness. This provides space for one’s own imagination, for the grace and beauty of small things, for the unfolding of that which lies in between.

In his photographs Michael Kenna creates fullness from emptiness; he makes the invisible visible. His photography appears to remain at a distance and yet it is full of passion.



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海から

A black and white photograph of a rocky beach. The foreground is covered in irregular, light-colored stones and pebbles. In the middle ground, the ocean waves are visible, creating a textured pattern of white foam and grey water. The sky above is a uniform, pale grey. Overlaid on the center of the image is the word "SEA" in a large, bold, white, sans-serif font.

SEA



FORMS OF ISOLATION

The grey path curls around a low, rocky coast, the coast of the Sea of Japan. On the left, its unfathomable blue expanse undulates above a narrow strip of stony land or a series of dunes until it reaches the pale horizon beyond which, under the same white sun, lies Korea. Here and there the glistening surf sparkles at us between steep cliff faces. To the right another immeasurable sea – a still sea of green – extends towards distant, misty, forested hills behind which blurred peaks jut up towards the sky: an immense plane of rice fields whose surface is moved by silent waves. They are moved by the same great breath that today sweeps the blue from Korea to Japan.

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Lafcadio Hearn

14 I believe that I can recognise something typically Japanese at first glance. Unlike on my travels to most other countries, I already carried my pictures of Japan in my mind when I arrived there. My impression of Japan is confirmed by many visual impressions. Much of it feels familiar. And yet Japan is also foreign to me and feels to me like an infinitely ambiguous system full of secret codes, rules of conduct and signs that I know I will never truly understand.

Japan's isolated position, enclosed by the sea, has had an effect on many parts of Japanese culture. Although the country is nowadays connected to the world in the same way that all other countries are, the effects of centuries-long isolation are still present. The sea was both the boundary and the window on the world – but this window appeared to remain shut from the inside for a long time. The forms of Japanese culture developed in the shut-off interior of Japan in the same way that some life forms have developed in isolated habitats and are to be found only there. Japanese isolation is a form and simultaneously a formative power. Nothing in Japan's nature corresponds to this idea more closely than the sea.

In Michael Kenna's photographs this isolation is present as an object and in the formal expression. Water that reaches as far as the horizon, a scattering of jetties, a small number of lost-looking stakes; there is no tangible connection between the land and the sea, between humankind and nature. The sea does not tempt us to set sail, it is cold and uninviting, foreign, sometimes covered by ice. When it does touch the land, the dividing lines are sharp. Sometimes the sea and the land even appear to launch themselves at each other aggressively in a stormy surge.

The gaze travels from an isolated land out towards something that is foreign and that can give rise to nothing that is not foreign. It feels as though viewers looking out at the sea are alone in their own worlds, as though there was no life beyond their own point of view and no connection to the outside and the beyond. The natural isolation that results from the sea divides that which exists in Japan from everything that does not exist there. The consciously executed isolation, the active seclusion of the Japanese, also explains the development of their unique culture.

“For me, photography is the recognition
in reality of a rhythm
of surfaces, lines and values from life.”

Henri Cartier-Bresson



Michael Kenna's photographs capture that which exists, but they also allow us to sense that which does not exist, which causes us to feel a form of isolation. Coasts are visible, but no beaches. Jetties lie in the water like runways, but there are no boats. Boats are positioned on wood frames as in a dry dock on snow-covered land. Rocks and stones look like sculptures in the water. In the visible forms of nature we feel powers that remain invisible to our eyes. Land and sea do not enter a relationship with one another. Those who leave the land appear to be lost in the stillness and emptiness. As though the sea stood for something that is foreign – a hazard, a mystery.

It seems that the isolation functioned as a catalyst and brought forth a highly developed culture with a great wealth of expression. The Japanese tea ceremony, the art of flower arrangement and of archery, calligraphy and Japanese garden art are just a few examples. The isolation has the effect of a paradox, of a formative power that brings forth a great wealth instead of a reflection of its nature, namely the limitation to that which is its own.

Michael Kenna's art is itself a form of isolation. In one picture he isolates that which is essential, also through the art of exclusion and simplification, through the art of slowness and concentration in the selection of the subject. In the viewer's mind the picture is populated with personal thoughts and stories. Fullness grows out of emptiness. In doing so Kenna perhaps gets as close as a foreigner can to understanding Japanese subjects.

In *The Decisive Moment* Henri Cartier-Bresson writes: "*In order to 'give a meaning' to the world, one has to feel oneself involved in what one frames through the viewfinder. This attitude requires concentration, a discipline of mind, sensitivity, and a sense of geometry – it is by great economy of means that one arrives at simplicity of expression. One must always take photos with the greatest respect for the subject and for oneself.*"

Perhaps forms of isolation are all that non-Japanese people can understand about Japan. We never truly arrive in Japan, never truly immerse ourselves in it. We remain foreign. We, too, are isolated there.