Fascination with the Imagined and Unknown

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In its heyday, Japanese tourist photography had an obsession with all that is "Japanese." An unintended consequence of the mass production and distribution of select-pictures was an often romanticized identity of Japan that was forged through the works of primarily Western foreign photography studios.[1] The iconic subjects of these types and views were able to highlight the external and innate aspects of the country which are integral to Japanese civilization. Simultaneously, however, they were also restrictive to the nation's growth and development. Japan could either remain as it was with what foreigners regarded as an unreproducible charm (though still inferior to the West) or evolve and lose the very qualities that offered it a small amount of respect in the first place. In this way, uniqueness becomes a double bind, a harmful element of division, separating Japan from the rest of the West and Western standard.

The religion section of the exhibit houses multiple views regarding a specific Shinto temple-shrine; Tōshō-gū in Nikkō, which is located North of Tokyo in Tochigi Prefecture. Many more photographs of Tōshō-gū exist within Haverford Special Collections and the tourist photography genre as a whole, however, due to curatorial choices of wishing to show the brevity in imagery associated with Japan, only a few were selected. That being said, while there are a wide variety of Tōshō-gū views, it was the recycling of the same subject matter and even reprinting of the original photographers' work that came to construct an identity of Japan. How foreign photographers of the Meiji Era chose their subject matter and ultimately decided on what

[1] This idealization of traditional Japanese culture eventually spread to Japanese photography studios hosted by ambitious Japanese entrepreneurs.

constituted as Japanese is an interesting yet vast discourse. Therefore, what this essay will explore is their deliberate decision of Tōshō-gū in particular.

From a foreigner's perspective, appeals behind Tōshō-gū could be the sheer difference or "exoticness" of East Asian religious architectural styles in comparison to Western standards or conformities and also its departure from Western expectations of what Japanese aesthetics ought to be. In close association with these preconceived notions of the Japanese identity, is also the historical ties the shrine-temple, in particular, has with the country's historic samurai culture. Through the authority of Western civilization, they were able to preserve both Japanese history and heritage as well as Western fantasy and fascination.

Religion in Japan

Shintō religion in Japan has played a critical role in the country's history and culture. Japan's own cosmology, or creation story, begins with the gods Izanagi and Izanami who stirred the sea to create the islands from their perch in the heavens above. It was also the groups of higher gods, more specifically the sun goddess Amaterasu, that the Japanese imperial family are said to have descended from. Smaller deities, or kami, also exist everywhere in all places and objects, thus tying the religion closely to nature. This gives even the most inconspicuous things such as trees and soil meaning or power. Shintō's relationship with the environment also places emphasis on the natural state of being or cyclical birth and death of all things.

The other dominant religion in the region, Buddhism, was introduced in 552 BCE and thought to have been transferred from a kingdom on the Korean peninsula.[2] The most popular of

[2] Paul Varley, *Japanese Culture: Fourth Edition* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 19-47.

the two major sects, Mahayana Buddhism, or the Greater Vehicle, believed that all have the potential to achieve Buddhahood. This inclusivity for a better life or afterlife appealed to the masses not just in Japan, but all across East Asia. Therefore, many rulers sought to utilize it to mobilize people into greater unified states and nations. Buddhism was able to integrate itself with relative ease into Shinto due to what many refer to as their complementary natures.[3] Buddhism is known for its relatively pessimistic view of the present human state in which all live in suffering and death is inevitable. On the other hand, Shinto acknowledges the innate character or disposition of life and all living things to exist in cycles, so while death is also expected, what is more emphasized is the following process; that is, the hope or beauty of rebirth.

Western Religious Architecture

A general interest in Tōshō-gū could have easily stemmed from its East Asian architectural style and traditional building materials which greatly differed from familiar Western and European religious buildings. By the 20th century, the various sects of Christianity and Judaism already had established standards to architectural construction and layout in the times of their multitudinous transformations throughout the past millennia. For example, the inclusion of light-filled spaces via stained-glass windows was developed in the twelfth century and has in many ways become a precedent for the design of churches today.[4] Similarly, the shift from round arches to pointed arches during that time period also continued onto times into the 20th and 21st centuries becoming what many would consider to be key architectural features of

[3] Ibid, 22.

[4] Jeanne Halgren Kilde, "Historicism, Modernism, and Space" in *Sacred Power, Sacred Space an Introduction to Christian Architecture and Worship (editor)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 78.

Christian architecture.[5] In the case of Jewish synagogues, there has never been architectural standards for their construction, however, the 19th century saw a rise in Neo-Moorish styled buildings all across Europe, which is marked for a return to "oriental" or Islamic features that included extravagant decor that lasted into the early 20th century. [6] It is worth acknowledging that these changes in European religious architecture transpired at approximately the same time as the Meiji Period (1868-1912) in Japan. Despite the various Europe-based movements occurring though, there still remained a consistency in European building structure, shape, and materials used.[7] For example, the interior layouts of the Catholic churches (e.g. placements of alters, pews, and crucifixes) remained uniform along with used materials including stone, concrete, and glass.[8] Traditional architectural shapes were also retained.

Not only did Japanese architecture contrast with these native Western standards that most foreigners had, but they also conflicted with the newly constructed Western-styled buildings that were popping up in Japanese port cities. These contemporary urban landscapes were created in part of Japanese efforts of modernizing, part of their model coinciding with Westernization. Prior to these changes, the Japanese had constructed homes and other buildings almost entirely out of wood.[9] In the face of modernization during the Meiji Period, urban centers were now made out of brick and rising high into the sky. Newspapers of the time recorded these changes in print and remarked the "enchanted feeling of being in a foreign country" that the forests of these new

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[5] Ibid, 66.
[6] nJohn M. Efron, "Of Minarets and Menorahs: The Building of Oriental Synagogues," in *German Jewry and the Allure of the Sephardic*, editor? (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 128-129.
[7] Kilde, *Historicism, Modernism, and Space*, 175-176.
[8] Ibid).
[9] Varley, *Japanese Culture*, 241.

buildings provided.[10] Similarly to temples and shrines though, homes remained the same, their exterior and interior designs signifying preference in maintaining tradition and cost efficiency.[11]

Ise Shrine as the Shintō Standard

Historistically Japanese religious architecture has favored a style that integrates itself with its natural geographical environment. Origins can be traced all the way back to the early stages of Japanese civilization in the late Jōmon (10,000-300 BCE) to early Yayoi period (300 BCE-300 AD) when Shinto first emerged.[12] What has become the "Japanese aesthetic" of today was cultivated from the "value of naturalness, or the preference for things in their original, unaltered states. For the artist or craftsman, naturalness means staying close to his materials. Thus the products of his work are admired not only for their natural texture but also for the imperfections that inevitably appear in "primitively" produced things".[13] It can be noted then that this preference which stemmed from nature came to influence aspects of Japanese society beyond architecture such as pottery, carving, metallurgy, etc.

A prime example of this aesthetic applied to religious architecture is Ise Shrine built in approximately mid-sixth century BCE, in dedication to the sun-goddess Amatesrasu. The main building houses the imperial regalia which are said to embody her image. Ise Shrine is constructed in what is known as the "granary" structure. As the name would imply, the design was first implemented for rice storage, wet-rice agriculture being a fundamental component to

[10] yIbid, 242.
[11] Ibid).
[12] Ibid, 17.
[13] Ibidy, 6.

Japanese and East Asian civilization.[14] Not only did agriculture and thus food evoke a sense of community, but it also became embedded into the religion as festivals often focused around harvest and the gods associated with natural forces that incurred a plentiful bounty. Ise Shrine as well as the granary structure would become the standard for all early shrines in Japan.[15] This style of construction is accompanied by simple thatched roofs and soft-wood cypress that is intentionally left unpainted as to emphasize the natural qualities of the material.[16]

One peculiarity of the shrine is the tradition of its rebuilding, or in line with Shinto ideas of cyclical existence, rebirth. Every twenty years the shrine is not only rebuilt, but also moved to an adjacent designated area. The material itself, cypress, as most woods are, is known for warping and sagging therefore another reason for the reconstruction of Ise Shrine.[17] Subsequent shrines followed this "granary" style with similarly simple decor. They are often situated in forest surroundings, again reinforcing the connection with nature. Their wooden exteriors are also left unpainted, in a way sacrificing the longevity of the wood in the face of weathering damage.[18] Because of its ephemeral nature, many call into question its effectiveness then as a monument to Japan. Popular arguments, however, suggest that such cyclical rebuilding does represent Japan or the Japanese aesthetic quite well. In regards to Tōshō-gū, its almost garish decor marks a specific time period for the country, rather than speak for this overarching image.

Furthermore in relation to Shintō-style buildings, Buddhism followed this trend of more simplified and nature embedded architecture through the imperial-funding of mountain temples

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[14] Ibidy, 17-18.
[15] Coaldrake H. Willia, "Ise Jingu," in *Architecture and Authority in Japan* (London and New York Routledge, 1996), 268.
[16] Varley, *Japanese Culture*, 17-18.
[17] yIbid, 17.
[18] Ibidy, 6.

during the Heian period. Again, a preference towards the imperfection seen in Shinto structures revealed itself through the adaptation of architectural shapes and placements to the special features of mountains, or the rough and uneven terrain.[19] Even in ideology, Japanese buildings contrasted with Western styles of architecture, as the simplistic approaches to Japanese religious buildings also "revealed the Far Eastern impulse to merge with—rather than seek to overcome—nature. A keen sensitivity to nature and a desire to find human identity with it in all its manifestations are among the strongest themes in the Japanese cultural tradition. It is arguably from these precedents that Western expectations of what is "Japanese" in terms of style would have been constructed".[20]

Figure 1. Cathedral of Notre Dame, Chartes, France. Photo by Karen M. Gerhart.[21]

[19] yIbid*n*, 48-76.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Kilde, *Historicism, Modernism, and Space*, 68.

Figure 2. Cathedral of St. Denis, Paris, France. Photo by Mark Carlier.[22]

[22] Ibid, 70.

Tōshō-gū Taking a Departure from Tradition

As stated earlier, the "Japanese aesthetic" was said to have developed practically at the start of Japanese civilization itself. That and Shinto cultivated a Japanese image of simplicity that valued rawness found only in nature. In the face of a multitude of temples and shrines embedded within the countryside and cityscapes alike, it would be easy to find anomaly amongst the simplistic structures. For a number of scholars, the over-ornate nature of Tōshō-gū is said to have been a point of contention in discussing the nature of Japanese architecture as it seems almost "incompatible with our stereotypical ideas of traditional Japanese architecture—simplicity, natural wood, and subtle ink decorations.[23] Furthermore, there are over five hundred paintings and five thousand sculpted images at Nikkò Tōshō-gū, making it an arduous task to evaluate the entire shrine complex".[24] The sheer number of extra designs also helps differentiate Tōshō-gū from other previous or latter temples and shrines as it richly ornate, perhaps almost ostentatious to some viewer's tastes. When going through the exhibit, take a look at HC12-5589, *The three monkeys-Sanzaru*. This is a motif elegantly carved into a horse stable of all places.

Architecture of an Old Age

Apart from being a temple-shrine, Tōshōgū was built to house the deceased body of Tokugawa Ieyasu (r.1600-1616), founder of the Tokugawa Shogunate and considered of the three great unifiers of Japanese history alongside Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi.

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[23]t Karen M. Gerhart, "Nikkō's Yōmeimon: Sculpture and Sacred Landscape," in *The Eyes of Power: Art and Early Tokugawa Authority*, editor? (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 74.
[24] Ibid.

Ieyasu came to power after the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600. The new era of Bakufu or Shogunate, which was a type of military-style government, he founded would be referred to as the Tokugawa Shogunate. [25] It was Ieyasu's lineage that remained in power until the Meiji Restoration (1868). The end of the Edo period marked the end to many things, not only the end of Tokugawa power, but also to the end of military government as the imperial family was then reinstated as supreme political authority. Within the Bakufu, existed the samurai, or warrior class, who too, would become obsolete in the face of modernization. Given the rarity these former warriors were becoming, many scholars point to tourist photography when looking for solid evidence of Western fascination with uniquely Japanese aspects of former society. It is albums of these photographs that not only present samurai reenactments but also former samurai in their armor placed strategically in front of iconically "Japanese" establishments like Tōshōgū Shrine at Nikkō in order to provide "authoritative framework, which validated the studio recreations of Japan's disappearing samurai heritage". [26]

As seen in the figure below, having the "right" backdrop to a type can add to the authenticity of the subjects to an uninformed viewer. In regards to Tōshōgū, the temple-shrine has extra close proximity to the existence of samurai given it was constructed in the last era of the class warriors.

[25] yVarley, *Japanese Culture*, 142).
[26] Hockley Allen, "Expectation and Authenticity in Meiji Tourist Photography," in *Challenging Past and Present: The Metamorphosis of Nineteenth-Century Japanese Art*, edited by Ellen P. Conant (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 127.

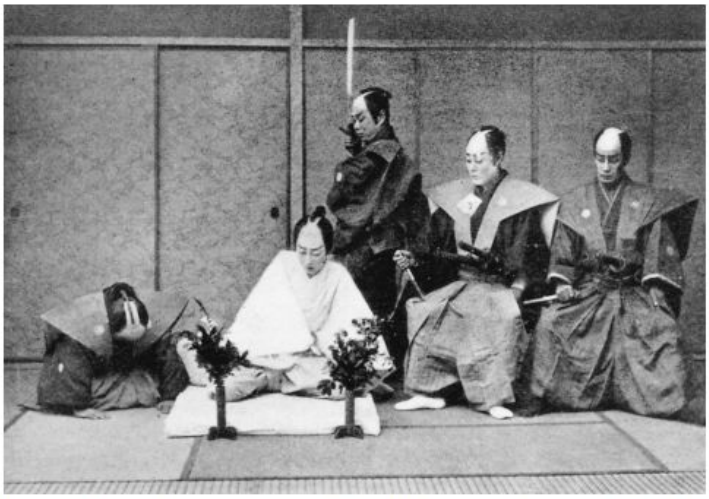

Figure 3. Harakiri, or ritual of disembowelment, reenactment. Photo by unknown.[27]

Conclusion

Western fascination with Tōshō-gū as subject for tourist photography and ultimately a symbol of Japan, is marked by dissociations and associations with their own notions of normalcy and what "is" Japanese and what is "not" considered Japanese. This essay noted the overall separation between Western Christian and even Jewish architecture with Japanese Shinto and Buddhist religious buildings of the time as well as Tōshō-gū's unlikeness to even the majority of Japanese architecture that was present during the turn of the twentieth century. Another point of intrigue for Tōshō-gū is its deep connection with the (at the time) not so distant past of samurai, which became just one more fascination of Japan for Western romanticisms. When you peruse through the exhibition, look at the Tōshō-gū and Nikkō works. Examine the details in their design. What jumps out to you the most? Is your attention drawn because of their uniqueness to all that you know in regards to architecture, or do you reach out first to what is most familiar?

[27] Ibid

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