

These lines on stripes are drawn from the fourth chapter of Kuki Shûzô's 1930 book *Reflections on Japanese Taste—The Structure of Iki* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1930). It was translated into English in 1997 by John Clark, who also edited the book together with Sakuko Matsui (Sydney: Power Publications, 1997).

Shûzô was a cosmopolitan member of an early 20th-century modernizing elite in Japan. Bridging Western and Eastern traditions in philosophy, he was one of the first native thinkers to conceptualize a specifically Japanese aesthetics. The word “*iki*” was used in 19th-century Japan to define the ineffable charm of the geisha. It is a distinctly ethnic sensibility, at once disdainful and captivating, alluring and reluctant. Shûzô defines the fundamental aesthetic structure of *iki* in terms of *seduction,* *brave composure,* and *resignation*—an “inflexible grace” manifest in both subjective consciousness and objective expressions. This short excerpt on parallel lines is a rather small part of the whole.

The non-*iki* diagrams on page 123 and the very *iki* hair on page 126 were scanned from the Italian edition.

Thanks to Francesca Bertolotti for recommending the book

First, as free art, design plays an important role in the expression of *iki*. What forms does the objectification of *iki* as design adopt? To begin with, the relational quality of coquetry must be expressed in some way, and expressed with the specific character of the objectification of “brave composure” and “resignation.” In geometric figures there is nothing which better expresses this relational quality than parallel lines.

Parallel lines which run forever without meeting are the purest visual objectification of the relational. It is certainly no accident that the strip, as design, is regarded as *iki*. According to *Mukashi mukashi monogatari* (Tales of Long, Long Ago), the ordinary woman wears a foil-embroidered, wadded silk garment, while the courtesan wears a striped garment. By the Tenmei period (1781–1789) wearing striped silk was officially permitted in the warrior households, and in the Bunka (1804–1814) and Bunsei (1818–1830) periods striped crêpe was the preferred cloth of the playboy. *Harutsuge-dori* describes the “attire of a (male) guest for the mistress”: the “outer tunic was a dull lemon-brown striped Southern crêpe, the half coat was a sesame seed pattern striped cloth of Santomé cotton — along with a wallet and other portable things, and these were all *iki*, following the same pattern, as you should know.” In *Shunsoku Ume-goyomi* the clothes worn by Yonemachi when she comes to visit Tanjirō were “thick mouse-grey” stripes of Ueda coarse silk (outer kimono), black “small willow” satin (inner surface of obi). But what kind of stripe is particularly *iki*?

To begin with we can say it is the vertical stripe rather than the horizontal stripe which is *iki*. Kimono stripe patterns used only the horizontal stripe until the Hōreki period (1751–1764). Stripes were called weave threads, which meant the horizontal. The horizontal stripe woven on the waist of the *noshime* (a ceremonial robe worn under trousers) and the horizontal threads of a *torizome* dyeing (which emphasizes the weft) were both in fashion before the Hōreki era. But the vertical stripe became fashionable from the Hōreki and Meiwa (1764–1771) periods, and came to be exclusively employed in the Bunka and Bunsei, expressing their *iki* taste.

Why is the vertical stripe more *iki* than the horizontal? One reason may be that the lines of vertical stripes are more easily perceived than horizontal ones. Since the eyes are aligned bilaterally on the horizon, bilaterally aligned vertical stripes running perpendicularly on the horizon can be

easily perceived as parallel lines (constituting the foundation for bilateral parallel relations). It requires some effort for the eyes to perceive horizontal stripes as parallel lines, the basis of whose parallel relation exists in running along the horizon, which is perpendicular to top and bottom. In other words, from the position of the eyes the horizon is something which in general expresses the relation of things that meet and part. So the vertical stripe will make us clearly conscious of the distanced opposition of two lines, and the horizontal stripe will make us aware of the continuous succession of a single line. That is, the nature of the vertical stripe allows us to grasp the relational. Furthermore, there is its undoubted relation to gravity. In the horizontal stripe the weight of the earth's strata rests against gravity; in the vertical stripe there is the lightness of "willow branches" and the light rain which gravitates. The horizontal stripe stretches to left and right to form the width—making the scene appear broad and thick—whereas the vertical stripe runs from top to bottom, making the scene appear long and thin. In sum, the vertical stripe is more *iki* than the horizontal because a dyadic quality is more clearly expressed by parallel lines and because a sense of intricate precision is better revealed. Yet there are cases where the horizontal stripe may be felt to be particularly *iki*. There may be, but only under various kinds of special constraint.

The first such case has a reciprocal relation to the vertical stripe. The horizontal stripe may be expressly felt as *iki* when a knot contrasts a horizontal stripe to the vertical stripe of a kimono; for example, when a horizontally striped obi is placed against a vertically striped kimono, or when a vertical stripe is evident in wood grain, or in the way lacquering on clogs employs a horizontal stripe on the thong.

In the second case the horizontal stripe bears a reciprocal relation to the form of a whole scene. For example, it is particularly *iki* when a girl with a slender figure is dressed in a kimono with a horizontal stripe. It is not suitable for a fat woman to wear a kimono with horizontal stripes because it will generally make a scene appear broad and full. On the contrary, the horizontally striped kimono suits a slender, thin woman well. It is not that the horizontal stripe is more *iki* than the vertical. The horizontal stripe becomes expressly *iki* only when persons who already bear special characteristics in the whole substratum of their bodies provide the background of it.

Finally, the horizontal stripe is related to the durability of feelings and sensations. When the vertical stripe has become rather too commonplace for feeling and sensation — in other words when feeling and sensation have been dulled by the vertical stripe — the horizontal stripe may be felt to be expressly *iki* and to possess a fresh flavor. It is mainly because of this that the recent resurgence of the horizontal stripe in the world of fashion has a tendency to show off a particularly *iki* quality.

Quite separate from these specific considerations, when we consider the relationship of vertical and horizontal stripes to *iki* we must make a judgment about their absolute value as patterns. There are vertical stripes which lack the clarity of the relational as parallel lines — like the thousand or ten thousand stripe pattern at the limit of fineness [and density], or those with too many variations in thread size and width, like the mother-and-child stripe [one thick, one thin], or the random stripe [different thicknesses] — and do not adequately play on the effects of *iki*. To be *iki* it is essential for the stripe to be furnished with a suitable roughness and simplicity and for the relational to be clearly grasped.

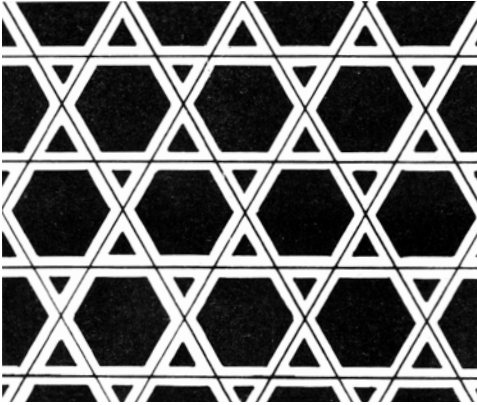
In cases where horizontal and perpendicular parallel lines intersect, the criss-cross design will be produced. The criss-cross design is in general less *iki* than either vertical or horizontal stripes because the parallel line is not so easy to grasp. Even with the criss-cross design, it is the rough, so-called “checker board” pattern which can express *iki* — but our eyes must not suffer the obstruction of lines parallel to the horizon so that they can single-mindedly pursue the relational quality of lines parallel to the perpendicular. When the checkerboard pattern itself leans to the left or right at a forty-five degree angle (that is, when its parallel lines lose their perpendicularity and horizontality and form two systems at an angle), it usually loses its original *iki*. Why? It is because the eyes can no longer pursue the relational quality of parallel lines without stagnating, and as long as they look directly ahead, they will have to scrutinize the intersection of the two kinds of differing parallel lines. Further, when the square checkerboard pattern changes into a rectilinear pattern it becomes the lattice stripe because of its slenderness, and it is usually more *iki*.

In cases when part of the stripe is resist-dyed and the resist-dyed section is comparatively smaller than the stripe, it forms a pattern with the

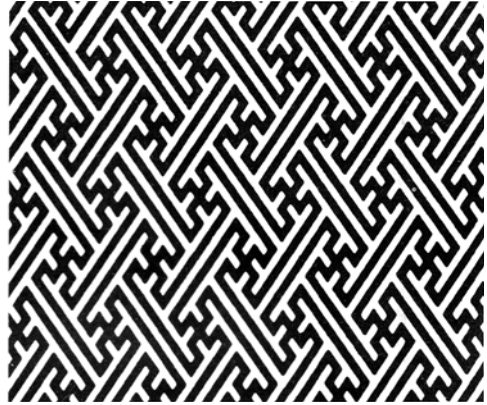
resist-dyed part over the stripe thread. When it becomes comparatively larger, the so-called resist-dye pattern proper is produced. The relationship of this kind of pattern to *iki* will impute to what degree the partial state of being of the stripes—which have escaped obliteration—suggests the unrestricted relational quality of parallel lines.

Among stripe designs, one in which the stripes radially converge on a single point is not *iki*. For example, a design does not express *iki* when it suggests umbrella spokes converging on a hub, or fan spokes running to the pivot, or a spider's web with a center, or the morning sun radiating to the four quarters. To manifest *iki*, disinterestedness and purposelessness must be expressed on the basis of the visual sense. Radial stripes gathering to a central point complete their purpose. For that reason they may not be felt to be *iki*. Were there to be an occasion for this kind of stripe to be *iki*, it would be when radially is shrouded and when stripes composed of parallel lines are hallucinated.

The further design departs from parallel stripes, the further it departs from *iki*. It is not necessarily impossible to perceive designs such as the [saké] measuring-box, the tie-dyed mesh pattern, the thunderbolt zigzag, and the Genji schema [of traditional symbols] in terms of parallel lines; especially where they connect vertically. Consequently it is possible for them to be *iki*. Yet when designs such as the basket weave, hemp leaf, and fish scale are constituted by means of triangles, they are far from *iki*. Moreover, complicated designs are generally not *iki*. The tortoise shell pattern brings together three pairs of parallel lines and reveals a hexahedron, but it is far too complex to be *iki*. The Chinese character *manji* (Buddhist swastika) provides a complex sensation because the points of the cross—combined from perpendicular and horizontal lines—bend into a right-angle pattern. Thus the interconnected *manji*-pattern tie is not *iki*. As for the Chinese character pattern “A,” this is even more complicated. The character “A”—the design for official clothes in ancient times in China—signified “to turn the backs of officials and people on evil, and to face them to the good; it also meant joining and separating, departing and arriving.” The character “A” which bends at right angles up to six times, and turns “both selves ... back to back,” has not the slightest refinement. The design represents a bad aspect of Chinese taste and is quite the opposite of *iki*.



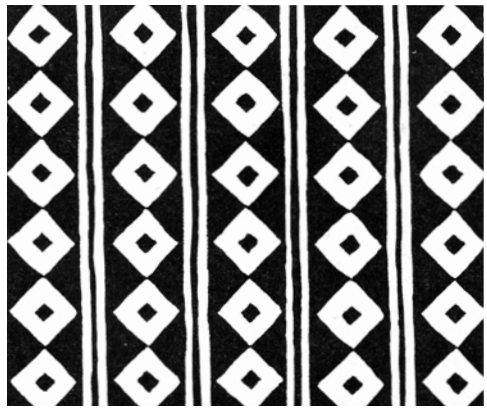
Basket weave



Buddhist Swastika



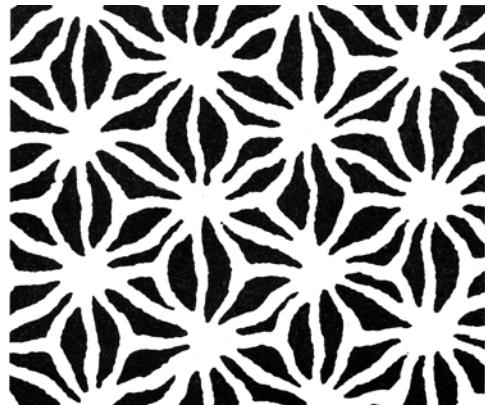
Saké measuring box



Tie-dyed mesh



Vajra motif



Hemp leaf

Next, a design with curves does not as a rule constitute a well-formed expression of *iki*. Where the curves are entwined in a lattice stripe with a spiral pattern, the stripe loses *iki* altogether. It is also rare to discover *iki* where the vertical stripe is in an overall curve or wave form. When the split water chestnut design, which derives from the straight line, curves and changes into the water chestnut flower design, it becomes “showy” and loses even the slightest vestige of *iki*. It is not that the fan motif cannot be *iki* as a folded fan with straight lines, but that as soon as it is opened it describes an arc and will not retain even a suggestion of *iki*. So arabesque design from before the Nara Court (646–794) with the coiled lines of young bracken, or the arabesque design of the Temyō period (710–794) which is more or less constituted by a curve, are only distantly connected with *iki*. Likewise, the interlaced circle design of the Fujiwara period (877–1086), and the polka dot design fashionable from the Momoyama (1568–1615) to the Genroku (1688–1704) are curvilinear and do not meet the condition of *iki*.

It is essentially because the curve matches the movement of the line of sight that it is easily grasped and thought to provide an agreeable sensation for the eyes. And it is for this reason that there are even people who advocate the absolute beauty of the wave pattern. The curve is, however, unsuitable for the clear-cut chic expression of *iki*. Someone once said: “All warm things, all love, have either a round or oval shape and will depict a spiral pattern and other curves. Only the cool and the disinterested have angles and the straight lines. If a troop of soldiers were assembling in a loop without stationing in file, they would probably dance and not fight.” Yet *iki* has a rigorous character which is inexpressible in a curve. “Pardon. It’s me, Agemaki.” It is cool disinterest. Here it is clear that the art form of *iki* is something which, of its own accord, diverges from the so-called “beautiful petite.”

To go further, unlike the geometric, pictorial design is certainly not *iki*. “She puts on a conventional, replaceable neckpiece, embroidered with butterflies in gold and silver” (Harutsuge-dori). We see a design which depicts three threads running perpendicularly from top to bottom of the scene, with three willow branches hung down at the side, and at the bottom of the thread a *shamisen* plectrum. The willow branches are combined with just three cherry blossoms. The depicted contents and

the arrangement of parallel lines suggest an *iki* design, but the actual impression is of something extremely refined with no *iki* whatsoever. Because of its nature, pictorial design has no potential to neatly express the relational to the extent that geometric design does, and this is why pictorial design cannot, as design, be *iki*. That Kôrin and Kôetsu designs and so on are not *iki* is also mainly due to this. As design *iki* is objectified within geometric patterns, which are moreover designed in the true sense. That is, in remaining undetermined in the concrete expression of the actual world, the meaning of the free art which creates form as design exists only in geometric patterns.

*



"*Iki* hairdos, like the the ginkgo leaf top-knot, were all those that ignored orthodox prescriptions."