The Book of Tea Study Guide

The Book of Tea by Okakura Kakuzō

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The Book of Tea by Kakuzo Okakura is a short volume that explains the unique tradition of the Japanese tea ceremony, from utensils used at the ceremony to historical context.

In the late-19th and early-20th centuries, Japan underwent a period of modernization. Some conservatives opposed such modernization and wished to preserve the old ways. One of these was this book's author, Okakura. He founded the Japanese Art Institution in Tokyo and later became a curator at the Boston Museum of Fine Art. He had an unparalleled knowledge of Oriental art, and it is because of men like Okakura that so much of Japanese heritage has been handed down. One aspect of this heritage is the tea ceremony.

Tea began as a medicine and evolved into a beverage. Only relatively recently have Westerners come to appreciate the medicinal, spiritual, and meditative properties of tea. In the Eastern world, tea has gone through three distinct periods: the Boiled Tea era, the Whipped Tea era, and the Steeped Tea era. Each era reflected its culture in some way. During the Whipped Tea era, renowned tea master Lu Wu created the first Code of Tea, the Ch'a Ching, which paved the way for the formalized tea ceremony.

Teaism, or the philosophy of tea, is closely related to the philosophies of Taoism and Zennism. From these schools of thought, Teaism borrows an emphasis on the individual, and an emphasis on the journey and the present rather than the end result.

The tea room is an unadorned and small room, made of wood and bamboo. Artwork or flowers are brought in during each ceremony, to be focused and praised for artistry and beauty. Guests are silent and sober, and the taking of tea takes on a sort of quasi-religious ceremony. Ancestors are honored via the ancient tea utensils. The room and utensils are kept immaculately clean, as cleanliness is a duty of the tea-master. While the tea-master is an acknowledged artist, the guests must have the discipline to attain the proper mindset to appreciate the artistry of the ceremony. The ancient art of flower arrangement, referred to as the Cult of Flowers, is also an important aspect to the sparse decoration used for each ceremony.

Tea-masters feel that the art of the tea begins with themselves. As such, dress, behavior, walking style, and other personal factors are all carefully controlled. Dress is composed of dull colors, and behavior is subdued and deliberate.

Introduction

Introduction Summary and Analysis

A historical background is established. The Japanese under Emperor Meiji in the second half of the 19th century were pursuing efforts to modernize. Modernization came with a price, namely, the destruction of the 'old' or traditional way of Japanese living. Students went to European universities, families adopted Western dress and learned to sit in chairs, and some tried to eat beef, although it was forbidden by Buddhism.

However, many did not accept efforts of modernization. There are several rebellions documented from this time period, and many more scholars and others who attempted to preserve the old culture. One of these is the author of the Book of Tea, Kakuzo Okakura.

Okakura was born in 1862 to a silk merchant. He studied at an English-language university, and was fluent in three languages - Chinese, English, and Japanese. He studied under a Harvard-educated American, Ernest Fenollosa, who was instrumental in halting Westernization in Japan and preserving parts of the old culture. This was necessary, as in the fever to modernize, many Japanese treated heirlooms and traditional art as little more than junk.

Fenollosa and Okakura went around Asia, finding art and other objects to preserve. In 1890 the two split, perhaps due to strong egos in both men, and the fact that Okakura was outdoing his master. Fenollosa left to curate the Boston Museum. In 1898, Okakura resigned his official post in a state institution to found the Japanese Art Institution, dedicating to preserving the Asiatic way of life.

Unfortunately, the state (which Okakura fought often in regards to modernization) would not fund Okakura's school. Okakura went to America with many paintings to sell to Americans. Like Fenollosa, he arrived in Boston. He stayed in America, giving lectures and eventually curating the very museum Fenollosa did after the latter resigned (unrelated to Okakura). Okakura worked to make the Boston Museum a world-famous repository of Asian art. Beyond curating, he wrote several books, lectured extensively, and submitted articles to academic and art journals. He died in 1913 after returning to Tokyo and contracting influenza.

In the editor's opinion, Okakura was a complicated man and a study of contrasts. He could be brilliant but also infantile, visionary but suffering from cultural myopia, arrogant and pedantic but sentimental. What cannot be disputed is that, in his time, he was one of the greatest Oriental scholars, and his knowledge of Oriental art was unparalleled. Though he was charming and had many friends, he made just about as many enemies. The editor sees three distinct sides of Okakura which he would alternately exhibit: the great scholar, the sentimentalist, and the visionary/messiah. The Book of Tea represents a harmonious synthesis of these personalities.

The Book of Tea is called an "apology" to the Western world for the conservatism of Japanese culture. Okakura used tea as a symbol for life in East Asia. The tea ceremony is a quasi-religious event, but not a religious rite per se. It is a ritual to honor the aesthetic - though not necessarily the beautiful - and in this way it is truly unique. Unlike Western thought, Eastern thought as represented in the tea ceremony approaches art with a collective rather than individual perspective, and honors ancestors in a way Western attitudes do not.

The Cup of Humanity

The Cup of Humanity Summary and Analysis

Tea began as a medicine and only gradually grew into a beverage. Teaism is the word for the "religion of aestheticism," which has grown up around tea in Japanese culture. Teaism celebrates the beautiful, the pure, and the harmonious. However, it consists of much more—everything from hygiene (a celebration of cleanliness) to economics to literature to democracy. Japan's isolation has been beneficial to Teaism.

The rhetorical question is asked: Why so much fuss about tea? Mankind is well known for investing great care in small things. Westerners have embraced wine to excess, or celebrated war to excess; why not a simple and pure thing like tea? A typical Westerner might see in the tea ceremony a certain quaintness and childishness that he would then equate to the entire culture of Japan and its people. The West may never truly understand the East. The West has developed a whole host of bizarre and incorrect stereotypes for Asians, and Asians have in turned developed the same for Westerners, although these stereotypes are breaking down with modernization.

Westerners seem to have embraced tea fully, both as a beverage and a social event, and so it is appropriate for Westerners to learn tea's origins and how tea is used elsewhere.

The year 879 is the first written mention of tea in the Western world. In the late-1500s, the first explorers brought tea to Europe. Some opposed tea, calling it a "filthy custom" or claiming it caused health problems, yet tea grew in popularity steadily. America's own Boston Tea Party shows the power of tea by the late-1700s. Some statesman, philosophers, and artists of the West could be referred to as "tea-philosophers," as they use tea for creative inspiration and contemplate tea itself, celebrating its essence.

The Schools of Tea

The Schools of Tea Summary and Analysis

Tea is art and requires a tea master to bring out its "noblest qualities." As with art, there is good and bad tea, and there is no mechanical method for making tea. There are three main eras of tea: the Boilerd Tea, the Whipped Tea, and the Steeped Tea. Okakura again emphasizes that tea, though seemingly a tiny part of one's life, can speak volumes about a culture. As with vintage and concern with years with wine in Europe, different tea periods can tell us about the different eras of Japan.

Tea was known in China since ancient times and was praised for its abilities to reduce fatigue, empower the soul, and repair eyesight. It became a favorite of Emperors and their courts. In the 8th century, a man named Lu Wu was born who could be considered "our first apostle of tea." He combined teaism with Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, producing a book called Ch'a Ching which is considered the Code of Tea. Lu Wu, in this book, describes all aspects of tea - gathering the right leaves, having the right equipment or tea-equipage, making tea, etc. He was very specific in many respects. He insists on mountain spring water as the best tea to brew with, and he prefers blue tea-cups, so they could contrast the best with the green color of the tea. Ch'a Ching also discusses well-known tea drinkers from history, and "vulgar" methods of tea drinking which are to be avoided. Lu Wu is associated wit the Boiled Tea era.

The Whipped Tea era followed, as part of the Sung dynasty. Tea leaves in this era were ground to powder, and this powder was whisked in to hot water to create tea. Tea became quite a craze during this period, with tournaments held to find the best tea recipe among other things. Emperor Huei Tsung lavished much wealth on the attainment of rare species of tea, and declared white tea to be the rarest and best.

The Whipped Tea era saw a change in the philosophy of tea. Whereas the Boiled Tea era used tea as a sort of poetry, emphasizing its symbolic nature, the Whipped Tea era emphasized self-realization, and how tea could literally change and purify the soul. It was during this era that Zen Buddhist monks developed a religious ritual involving tea which would eventually become the tea ceremony as it is celebrated today.

The Whipped Tea era ended with the Mongol invasion of China, beginning in the 13th century. Many old ways and customs were lost, including the art of whipped tea. Tea in this period was taken by steeping the leaves in hot water, hence the Steeped Tea era.

Unlike China, which underwent much cultural upheaval and military campaigns, Japan remained relatively untouched through the centuries, and thus gained an appreciation of all three types of tea making. By the 15th century, the tea ceremony is an established custom. The "Sung" movement of Whipped Tea continued in Japan unlike China. The tea ceremony adopted a central and quasi-religious significance; in the author's words, "Teaism was Taoism in disguise" (18).

Taoism and Zennism

Taoism and Zennism Summary and Analysis

Taoism and tea are connected in legend. It is said that a man named Kwanyin presented to his master Lao Tzu (founder of Taoism) tea in the first known tea ceremony. It is unfortunate that Taoism and Zennism, which are so intimately linked to Teaism, have had no very good translations for Westerners to digest properly.

Tao, translated literally, means a Path. Lao Tzu was uncertain about its conception himself, and so the exact meaning of Tao has changed based upon context. It is mostly concerned with "cosmic change" and the infinite nature of the universe. Taoism and its successor, Zennism, represent an individualistic trend in Southern Chinese thought, as opposed to communistic thought that expressed itself as Confucianism in Northern China.

Taoism challenged authority and laws, saying right and wrong were relative and not absolute. The individual is paramount to the state. Organized religion should be made suspect. The world is complex and "ridiculous." The harm we do to others is a result of a failure to know ourselves and come to grips with our own wickedness.

The chief contribution of Taoism to Asiatic life is aesthetic theory. Taoism is concerned with the present, not the past or future. It finds beauty in the current world of "woe and worry." Taoism emphasizes wholeness and totality. Lao Tzu's famous metaphor for this train of thought is the vacuum. A room should be more appreciated for the empty space between its walls than the walls itself, and a water pitcher is more valuable for the empty space it has reserved for storing water than the material used to make its outside.

The vacuum is reflected in many arts, such as the martial art of jiu-jitsu, which emphasizes absorbing the enemy's blows (being a vacuum) in order to exhaust him.

Zennism is next described. It means "meditation," and involves the belief that through consecrated meditation, supreme self-knowledge and self-realization may be attained. There are many similarities between Taoism and Zennism, including the emphasis on the individual and self-concentration. There is also an emphasis on relativity. Zennism believes that nothing is real except the human mind. Like Taoism's opposition to Confucianism, Zennism opposed itself to Buddhism in some ways. Zennism emphasized the abstract and the imaginary, whereas Buddhism emphasized memorization of scriptures. Zen's contribution to Eastern thought was its recognition of the everyday, the average, as of similar importance with spiritual matters. Zen emphasizes greatness in even the smallest things, and in this it has influenced Teaism greatly.

The Tea-Room

The Tea-Room Summary and Analysis

To Westerners brought up to admire stone and brick architecture, it is hard to appreciate the Japanese tradition of wood and bamboo architecture, and so it is hard to appreciate the tea room itself.

The tea room, or Sukiya, is a simple cottage. Sukiya can mean Abode of Fancy, Abode of Vacancy, and Abode of the Unsymmetrical. It eschews ornamentation, and leaves meaning to the imagination; it is the "vacuum" in which great things may be contained. It may seem quite barren to a Westerner.

Early tea rooms were connected to homes. Only with the innovations of Rikyu in the 16th century, the greatest of tea-masters, was the independent tea room created. The Sukiya consists of a small room, built to accommodate no more than five people, an anteroom where tea utensils are kept, a portico where guests wait until tea is served, and a garden path which connects the larger structure with the tea room. While the tea room looks small and impoverished, the construction of one may be very costly, for tea room builders are considered great artisans and they take great care in construction and materials.

The tea room not only contrasts Western architecture, it is quite different from Japanese wood architecture, which is usually grand and ornamented. In fact the tea room is primarily derived in spirit from the Zen monastery. Most great tea-masters were students of Zen, and so used Zen concepts for the tea room. For example, the size of the tea room is dictated by a passage in a religious text. The garden path was designed to remove a guest from the city or home environment, to sever any connection to the outside world. Some tea-masters aimed for a feeling of loneliness; others, for a feeling of spiritual reawakening and an appreciation of natural beauty.

Guests approach the tea room silently, and must hunch down to enter the three-foot-high door. This door, forcing everyone to hunch down, was meant to inspire humility. Guests gather into the room, all silent, and only when there is complete silence will the host appear. The only sound is the boiling water in the kettle. The kettle's bottom is made in such an uneven way as to produce a bit of a melody while water boils.

Everything is old and muted, but clean. Guests wear dull colors, light is subdued, and tea utensils are ancient heirlooms. Everything is immaculate, for cleaning is part of the art of the tea master. The tea room is also ephemeral, designed for a specific tea-master. Rebuilding and renewal is a part of the tea room and also Japanese culture in general. In this way, the building materials (wood and bamboo, rather than stone) are appropriate. Ideas of renewal are also associated with Zen notions of the body as a temporary temple to house the spirit.

Additionally, the tea room is intended to be barren, so that it may be ever-new by the incorporation of a single beautiful object at each ceremony. The focus on this one object allows it to be fully appreciated and concentrated upon. Any other decoration is in accordance with this single object.

Finally, there is an appreciation for non-symmetry, and non-repetition. Art and beauty is in the "becoming" and not in the end result. Uniformity of design is fatal to the imagination. The consequences this appreciation has for the tea room involves asymmetry and variety. If there are round cups, the pitcher should be square as opposed to round. If there are flowers, a painting of flowers is not acceptable. Utensils should not be placed in centers, but instead off-centers.

Art Appreciation

Art Appreciation Summary and Analysis

Okakura relates the Taoist tale of the Taming of the Harp. There was once a great harp crafted from the finest tree in the land. Many tried to play it, but only discordant notes came from the harp; it could not be mastered. Finally a harp master named Pai Ya took the harp, and he sang of nature and beauty and war and many of life's aspects, and the music was powerful and beautiful. When asked how he mastered the harp, Pai Ya responded that he let the harp choose the music, and that he wasn't sure if he was playing the harp or the harp playing him. Okakura uses this tale to illustrate art appreciation. When the right stimulus (art) comes along, the "secret chords of our being" are awakened and we vibrate in harmony in response. Ultimately, art and artist intermingle as to be indistinguishable.

To truly appreciate art, one must discipline one's mind to properly receive and perceive art. A masterpiece viewed in this way becomes a "living reality." Art masters are immortal, for their art lives in those who can appreciate it. The viewer is drawn to the soul of the artist, even above the result of their brush strokes or word choice. On the other hand, the great masters never forget that they are making art for an audience. Vain artists, absorbed with their own genius, can never truly connect with others. Art loving is a sort of religious experience, with the art lover being spiritually uplifted.

Art is highly prized in Japan; many stories feature the rescue of art pieces. However, quantity should not be confused with quality. Tea-masters, in choosing art for their ceremonies, only choose those pieces which specifically speak to them, and thus they are quite selective.

Okakura laments modern art appreciation for depending more on fashion and word of mouth than genuine, individual love for art. Also, archaeology should not be confused with art. Just because something is ancient, does not mean necessarily that it is art or that it is valuable.

Flowers

Flowers Summary and Analysis

Man has a very long history with flowers. They are a natural beauty that inspires the artistic soul. Flowers are associated with many traditions the world over, from weddings to funerals. However, no matter the flower's promise of enlightenment and beauty, humans have demonstrated again and again that they are monsters unworthy of the flower, and certainly not worthy to pluck it from the ground and kill it.

Eastern so-called "Flower Masters" perceive that they deal in death, and so treat flowers carefully and with honor. In the West, a massive amount of flowers are used and then tossed out, with no appreciation or consideration for the sacrifice of the flower. Okakura laments that the flower was born helpless with no way to defend itself.

If to cut flowers is a sin, the flower master makes up for it with the intense care he gives to cultivating a plant. Eastern plant care is an ancient art and treasured custom, and from this tea-masters have developed what is called the Cult of Flowers. Tea-masters justify the cutting of flowers by viewing it as a sacrifice in the service of a great and noble idea or artistic expression. And so this "sacrifice" is honorable and done with great care. Flowers and trees are selected very carefully, down to the branch, and only as much is cut as is absolutely essential.

Flowers selected in this manner are placed on the "tokonoma," or place of honor. Guests will salute this flower with a profound bow upon entering the space. When the flower withers, the plant is carefully buried, and maybe even memorialized with a monument.

The art of flower arrangement began with Buddhist saints; however, it is important to remember that this art is not a religious rite, but only done in service to decoration and art itself. There are two schools of thought in flower arrangement, the formalist and the naturalesque. The fundamental theories behind flower arrangement are referred to as the Leading Principle, the Subordinate Principle, and the Reconciling Principle, or Heaven, Earth, and Man.

Tea-Masters

Tea-Masters Summary and Analysis

Tea-masters were conscious of art as a living, present influence. They also believed that art begins from within, that even the tea-master was art himself. As such, etiquette, bearing, posture, clothing, walking gait, and many other things were all consciously controlled, especially during the tea ceremony.

Tea masters have done much to further art in Japan, from architecture to garden design and pottery. However, tea master influence also is reflected in aspects of everyday life. Many dishes are the invention of tea masters. Their sober dress have influenced many Japanese. They created the art of flower arrangement.

Lastly, tea masters have an understanding of the brevity of life, and how temporary it is, that life is a "tumultuous sea of foolish troubles." As such, death is no great thing to these masters. To illustrate this, Okakura tells the story of the Last Tea of Rikyu. Rikyu was a tea master serving his patron lord Hideyoshi. Rikyu, never content to be servile, frequently had arguments with Hideyoshi. During one of these fights, enemies of Rikyu planted rumors that Rikyu planned to poison Hideyoshi. Hideyoshi believed the rumors and condemned Rikyu to death. Rikyu had a final, magnificent tea ceremony. He gave his precious utensils out to guests, shattered the tea bowl into fragments, and then took his own life by stabbing himself in the stomach (Seppuku).

Characters

Kakuzo Okakura

Kakuzo Okakura is the author of The Book of Tea. He is a career academician, and has worked to preserve Japanese artwork and heritage and share his knowledge of the Asiatic cultures with Westerners. He founded the Japanese Art Institute to preserve Japanese art and culture, and later became a curator at the Boston Museum of Fine Art.

Editor Everett F. Bleiler sees Okakura as a study in contrasts, being both exceptionally brilliant and at the same time childish. He is in some ways well-learned, but in other ways he suffers from prejudice and cultural myopia. In addition to this complexity of character, Bleiler identifies three "sides" to Okakura, each of which are exhibited in The Book of Tea. These are the Scholar, the Sentimentalist, and the Visionary. While lesser works of Okakura have, in Bleiler's opinion, suffered from one of these sides being too dominant, The Book of Tea meshes the three sides quite well and equally.

Okakura has the knowledge of both history and art to provide a concise but thorough cultural context for the tea ceremony and its development. However, his feelings for the subject prevent his writing from being colorless or pedantic; indeed, he can sometimes express Teaism in very lyrical terms. He also has the perspective to be able to anticipate his Western audience's possible objections to the material as just another quaint, childish custom of the Easterners, and in doing so provide the opportunity for a deeper appreciation of Teaism by addressing such objections. In short, Okakura has tremendous knowledge and affection for his subject, and that is what has made The Book of Tea a minor classic.

The Tea-Master

The tea ceremony has a particular focus on the individual. The tea-master is the "auteur" of the ceremony, the one who plans it, brews the tea, and gives the ceremony its meaning and artistic expression. The tea-master's art has many aspects. The most obvious aspect is the brewing of the tea, a process as unique to a tea-master as a paint stroke or writing style. The tea-master carefully selects tea leaves based upon several rules and customs, and his brewing style is a combination of custom, innovation, and individuality.

The tea-master must master his space. He keeps the tea room immaculate - cleanliness is part of his art - and the physical dimensions of the tea room, colors, choice of mats, etc., are all carefully chosen. The tea-master's tea utensils, art in and of themselves, are usually prized heirlooms passed from tea-master to tea-master. In this way the tea ceremony honors the ancestors and the past.

The tea-master chooses a particular artwork or flower arrangement to act as the focal point of the ceremony. Again, a complex set of aesthetic ideals along with the tea-

master's own artistic discretion go into the choice of this centerpiece. The rest of the tea room is then decorated according to the centerpiece.

The tea-master considers himself a part of the art, and as such his body movements, speech, etiquette, dress, and mannerisms are all carefully choreographed and deliberate. He chooses dull colors for his wardrobe, so that the emphasis might be on the tea and the artwork.

Ernest Fenollosa

Kakuzo Okakura met Ernest Fenollosa at the Tokyo Imperial University. A Westerner interested in the preservation of Japanese culture, Fenollosa exerted a lasting influence on young Okakura. Eventually, the two would travel across Asia to find valuable artwork to preserve. Both men had strong personalities and large egos, and these qualities would eventually clash, leading to their professional separation.

Lu Wu

Lu Wu was a poet. He helped codify the tea ceremony through his Code of Tea, or Ch'a Ching. He lived during the Whipped Tea era.

Lao Tzu

Lao Tzu is the acknowledged founder of Taoism. The concepts he created with Taoism would have a lasting influence on Japanese culture and Teaism.

Rikyu

Rikyu is perhaps the best-known and most-respected tea-master of all time. He helped to formalize the tea ceremony and give it a philosophical framework, making it into what is is known today.

Pai Ya

Pai Ya, in a Taoist tale, is a harp player who is able to master the Harp of the Lung Men. His mastery was possible because he merged with his instrument, and could not tell whether he was playing the instrument or if the instrument was playing him.

Flower Master

The Flower Master is a Japanese artist who prepares flower arrangements according to custom and aesthetics. He acknowledges the pain he causes nature by the killing of flowers, but transforms this pain into a noble sacrifice for the sake of art.

Lord Hosokawa

Lord Hosokawa is the protagonist of a famous Japanese story that shows just how important art is to the Japanese. His mansion catches on fire and he goes into the burning building to rescue a prized painting. Rather than let the painting burn, he cuts his belly open and stuffs the canvas inside. He dies from the burning and the disembowelment, but his body protected the artwork from the flames.

Taiko Hideyoshi

Taiko Hideyoshi is the famous patron of Rikyu, the best-known tea-master. He becomes suspicious of Rikyu, believing rumors that Rikyu wishes to poison him, and orders his execution. Rikyu has one last tea ceremony before he commits Seppuku.

Objects/Places

Teaism

Teaism is the art of the tea ceremony. It incorporates many different disciplines, from tea brewing to hygiene to flower arrangement to architecture.

Ch'a Ching

Ch'a Ching, or the Code of Tea, was written by poet Lu Wu and it stands as the first attempt to codify the tea ceremony and explain its larger significance.

Taoism

Taoism, a philosophy invented by Lao Tzu that spread throughout South China, emphasizes the individual rather than society, and is suspicious of organizations like religion and the state. It focuses on the here and now and the potential of things, the "path" rather than the end destination. Much of Teaism is based upon ideas in Taoism.

Confucianism

Confucianism is considered as an opposite to Taoism, a philosophy that dominated North China. It emphasizes order and the community. Taoism cannot be fully understood without knowledge of Confucianism, and visa versa.

Lao Tzu's Vacuum

Lao Tzu uses the analogy of the vacuum to demonstrate Taoist doctrine. A room is most valuable for the space is surrounds and not for its walls, for example, and a water pitcher is most valuable for its capacity to hold water rather than the material used to craft the pitcher. Similarly, the tea room is celebrated for its potential rather than its physical construction per se.

Sukiya

Sukiya is the Japanese word for the tea room. It contains an anteroom where tea is prepared and utensils are kept, a main room to house the artwork and enjoy the tea, a portico for guests to gather on prior to the ceremony, and a garden path leading to the building that is meant to cut the guest off from the outside world.

Harp of Lung Men

The Harp of Lung Men is the subject of a Taoist tale. Many players tried to play the harp, but it only made discordant tones. Finally, Pai Ya played the harp, and it made beautiful music concerning spring, war, and other of life's aspects. Pai Ya was able to play by becoming one with the instrument, establishing a symbiotic relationship between the artist and instrument.

The Cult of Flowers

Tea-masters arrange their flowers according to the Cult of Flowers. The Cult of Flowers expresses remorse for cutting flowers, for cutting the flowers results in death. However, the Cult of Flowers also dictates that flowers are asked to sacrifice in the name of a greater idea or art form. As sacrifice for a greater good is honorable, so flower-cutting is justified. The Cult of Flowers also calls for extreme selectivity in choosing flowers to cut, and establishes some aesthetic rules for arrangement.

Kobori Enshu

Enshu was a tea-master who was also a gifted architect. Along with advances in the construction of tea rooms, he is responsible for the design of many other buildings, including castles and monasteries.

The Last Tea of Rikyu

The Last Tea of Rikyu is a well-known event that demonstrates, in Okakura's words, "tragic grandeur." Rikyu's patron, Hideyoshi, becomes suspicious of Rikyu, believing rumors that the tea-master plots to poison him. Rikyu is sentenced to death, but is given the "honor" of taking his own life. Rikyu leads a grand, last tea ceremony, made all the more poignant by its finality. After the ceremony is concluded, Rikyu commits seppuku.

Themes

Teaism is Related to Taoism and Zennism

Author Okakura makes it abundantly clear that the basic concepts of Teaism and the tea ceremony come from the older philosophies of both Taoism and Zennism. The first and most obvious connection is the legends handed down from generation to generation. The first tea ceremony is said to have involved Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism. Additionally, monks in Zen monasteries are known to have involved tea in their religious rituals, offering the drink to statues of their gods.

However, the more important associations between Teaism and Taoism/Zennism involve the underlying philosophies. Taoism and Zennism both involve an emphasis on the individual, unlike Confucianism and Buddhism. The power of the human mind is held in very high esteem; in fact, at the extreme, nothing exists except what is experienced in the mind. Teaism gets much of its aesthetic groundwork from Taoism in particular. Taoism stresses the present, and the value of potential. This "value of potential" is embodied in the concept of the vacuum, in which the space within the water pitcher, where water might be held, is more valuable than the water pitcher itself. Similarly, the tea room is conceived of as a Taoist vacuum, unadorned and small, with the potential of the tea ceremony (and what it does spiritually) being much more valuable than the room itself.

From Zennism, Teaism adopted its emphasis on (tea) meditation, and intense self-concentration. Zen sees the beauty and greatness in the smallest of things; similarly, teaism finds great value and contentment in the ostensibly small behavior of sipping tea. Zen also emphasizes the abstract and imaginary, as well as the value of incompleteness, insofar that the mind has the ability to then complete the incompleteness; in the art of the tea ceremony, this translates into asymmetry - as in the placement of tea utensils - and an emphasis on dull colors.

West Versus East

It is unsurprising to find a recurring theme of "West meets East" in a work written during a period of hasty Japanese modernization, in which the Japanese were becoming overwhelmed by Western influence.

Okakura begins his Book of Tea by asking a very simple question from the perspective of a Westerner: what is all the fuss about tea? In doing so, the author anticipates the challenge of introducing this topic to a Western world, and the resistance he might encounter. While stopping short of grouping all Westerners together, Okakura nevertheless sets up some general stereotypes for them, including narrow-mindedness and a belief that the Western way is the best way.

Okakura confronts this Western bias head on, belittling Westerns for their bizarre conceptions of the East. However, at the same time Okakura belittles the East for its own misconceptions of the West. By treating both sides equally, Okakura hopes to show that there are valuable things about both the West and East; neither side has the one correct answer. After all, the one thing to agree upon is that both East and West have embraced tea. By opening his Western reader's mind in this fashion, the reader will be more receptive to comprehending the importance of the tea ceremony.

Part of the problem Okakura faces is that the tea ceremony is quite unique. It is like a religious ceremony, with its emphasis on ritual and mechanized behavior, but in fact it is not. It is a social custom, but it is also a celebration of ancestry, hygiene, and art. There is really nothing equivalent to it in the Western world, and this hurdle must be overcome.

The Tea Ceremony is Art

One of Okakura's consistent tactics is the insistence that Teaism is not just about tea as a beverage, but in fact its scope is much broader. The tea ceremony is an artistic expression, and it involves aesthetics with rules as rigorous as any other artistic discipline.

The art of tea is embodied in the tea-master, of which there have been many famous men throughout the ages. The art of tea is a very individual art, due to this emphasis on particular masters. Each master has come to perfect his unique style of brewing. Like an artist's paint brush stroke or writing style, this brewing style cannot be duplicated. The tea ceremony is in fact based around the uniqueness of the tea-master. The tea room is constructed for the tea-master, and torn down after that tea-master has died or retired. Artwork selected for the tea ceremony is selected by the tea master according to his specific and individual taste. The visual color range in the room is strictly controlled, from the walls to the artwork to the attire of the tea-master and his guests. Flowers may be cut and arranged for the occasion, and once again this task is constrained by very exact, aesthetic rules.

The tea ceremony, like any great art, is meant to touch one's soul, to bring one to a higher level of consciousness, to stir the emotions. Colors are muted and silence is observed so that the mind can fully concentrate, both on the tea and on the specific artwork selected for the ceremony. Teaism emphasizes the viewer's role in the effectiveness of art. The viewer/taster must fully surrender to the experience, and prepare mentally, in order to appreciate the art and tea and be moved by it.

Style

Perspective

Perspective is crucial to understanding The Book of Tea. Author Kakuzo Okakura was born in a period of great change and cultural upheaval in Japan. In the late 19th century, Japan was undergoing a state-dictated period of modernization in order to "catch up" to the rest of the world, especially the West. Western attitudes, fashion, food, etc., were enthusiastically embraced by many in the race to modernize. However, there was a solid and outspoken minority who cautioned against modernization and the damage it was doing to Japanese heritage and appreciation for art and history. One of these conservatives was Okakura.

Okakura's purpose for writing The Book of Tea was to introduce curious Westerns to the peculiar Japanese tea ceremony tradition, and in so doing preserve what he considered a crucial part of Japanese culture. As an art historian and lifelong academician, Okakura is able to provide a considerable context to bear, not only in regards to the history of tea, but the philosophical precursors to Teaism, as well as concurrent aspects of Japanese culture, like flower arrangement. The underlying perspective beneath everything is a deep appreciation for the tea ceremony and what it represents: honor of ancestry, deference to art and aesthetic ideals, humility, etc. Okakura also understands that Westerners might have trouble attaining the depth of appreciation he has for his subject, and so some of his volume is dedicated to pointing out differences between the West and East and arriving at some sort of middle ground.

Tone

In the case of The Book of Tea, tone is highly interdependent on the author's perspective. Okakura is a conservative, a reactionary. He sees the damaging effects of Japanese modernization, and so The Book of Tea is his way to preserve what he perceives to be a crucial part of Japanese heritage, in much the same way that art is preserved in the museums and institutes he has curated.

In regards to tone, Okakura is polite but ultimately unapologetic about his deep affection for the tea ceremony. While he has a Western audience in mind, and while he wishes to speak to Westerners directly and introduce them to the tea ceremony, there is a sense that Okakura is not really willing to "apologize" for his culture, or make any concessions as to the ultimate value of the tea ceremony. There are in fact criticisms of the West: in some ways, Teaism is introduced as a sort of panacea to the problems of the West. Okakura asks, how would the West have benefited should it have developed something like the tea ceremony? The rhetorical answer is that the West would have benefited greatly, and the East has indeed benefited greatly from the development of Teaism.

However, Okakura refrains from scolding his audience or belittling the West. He has the academician's knack of asking questions and introducing concepts, and then leaving any conclusions to his audience. His tone is one of enlightenment and curiosity, and of positivity, not condemnation of the West or lamentation for the loss of the old ways.

Structure

This volume begins with an introduction by editor Everett F. Bleiler. He establishes the conflict between modernization and conservatism that was happening in Japan during Kakuzo Okakura's life and career. He also information about Okakura's life and his complex character. He finally summarizes The Book of Tea, and establishes its legacy.

The Book of Tea itself begins with a Table of Contents, which itself summarizes the chapters to follow. Seven chapters make up the The Book of Tea, each based upon different aspects of Teaism and the Japanese tea ceremony. Okakura begins by establishing the history of tea, and how it evolved from a medicine to a beverage and finally an artistic statement. Okakura also establishes contrasts between Western and Eastern thought, a theme that will recur throughout the volume.

The book goes on to document the history of the tea ceremony, including the three eras of tea. The book then moves in a philosophical/religious direction, focusing on Taoism and Zennism, and how these ancient philosophies are related to Teaism. With this historical context established, Okakura then delves into the specifics of the ceremony itself, including the construction of the tea room, the steps of the ceremony, the artwork that is incorporated, the state of the tea utensils, etc.

Okakura then moves into a more abstract direction, commenting on tea as an art and a quasi-religious ritual. As such, he inserts a small essay on art appreciation, and the need for the guest of the ceremony to prepare him or herself for appreciation of the ceremony. Okakura finally links the ancient art of Flower Arrangement to the tea ceremony, and describes the tea-master's philosophy of flowers.

Quotes

"One of the cardinal concepts of Oriental thought, from even before the time of Confucius, has been the belief that alternating, diametrically opposed forces govern the universe, like day and night. [...] Such was the case with young Okakura, for in the very heart of Westernization, at the Tokyo Imperial University, he learned to value his own culture by studying under the remarkable Ernest Fenollosa." (Introduction, vii)

"[Okakura] was a strange mixture of brilliance and infantilism, penetrating vision and the most ostrich-like reaction. He was a man with a mission, and he suffered from the contradictions that often constitute missionaries." (Introduction, xi-xii)

"[Teaism] is the noble secret of laughing at yourself, calmly yet thoroughly, and is thus humor itself - the smile of philosophy." (7)

"The heaven of modern humanity is indeed shattered in the Cyclopean struggle for wealth and power. The world is groping in the shadow of egotism and vulgarity. [...] Meanwhile, let us have a sip of tea." (8-9)

"Perhaps we reveal ourselves too much in small things because we have so little of the great to conceal. The tiny incidents of daily routine are as much a commentary of racial ideals as the highest flight of philosophy or poetry." (10-11)

"To the latter-day Chinese tea is a delicious beverage, but not an ideal. The long woes of his country have robbed him of the zest for the meaning of life." (16)

"The whole ideal of Teaism is a result of this Zen conception of greatness in the smallest incidents of life. Taoism furnished the basis for aesthetic ideals, Zennism made them practical." (29)

"The simplicity of the team-room and its freedom from vulgarity make it truly a sanctuary from the vexation of the outer world. There and there alone can one consecrate himself to undisturbed adoration of the beautiful." (41)

"At the magic touch of the beautiful, the secret chords of our being are awakened, we vibrate and thrill in response to its call. Mind speaks to mind. We listen to the unspoken, we gave upon the unseen." (43)

"It is much to be regretted that so much of the apparent enthusiasm for art at the present day has no foundation in real feeling. In this democratic age of ours men clamor for what is popularly considered the best, regardless of their feelings." (47)

"Why not destroy flowers if thereby we can evolve new forms ennobling the world idea? We only ask them to join in our sacrifice to the beautiful. We shall atone for the deed by consecrating ourselves to Purity and Simplicity." (56)

"He only who has lived with the beautiful can die beautifully. The last moments of the great tea-masters were as full of exquisite refinement as had been their lives. Seeking always to be in harmony with the great rhythm of the universe, they were ever prepared to enter the unknown." (63)

Topics for Discussion

How is Teaism related to Taoism? How is it related to Zennism?

In what sort of period did Okakura write The Book of Tea? What is the author's purpose in writing this volume?

Why are drab colors encouraged on the walls of the tea room, and in the clothing of the guests and tea-master?

Into what eras is the history of tea divided?

What is Okakura's theory of art appreciation? What must the art lover do in order to maximize his experience with art?

Describe Lao Tzu's Vacuum analogy, and how it relates to Teaism and the tea room itself.

How do Tea-masters justify the cutting of flowers, insofar that they are killing flowers?