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FACES WITHOUT INDIVIDUALIZATION:
THE ART OF PORTRAITURE IN PREMODERN JAPAN

The present essay discusses the general ideas concerning the human face and, by extension, the notion of human individuality in traditional Japanese culture. The material for the analysis is borrowed from the diversity of literary, mythological, and, most prominently, pictorial sources spanning through the various epochs in the history of Japan.

I begin by representing two ancient myths where a mirror plays an important part as not only the crucial prop in the development of the plot but also helps to make serious conclusions about self-understanding and the image of self of the characters involved.

The first looks like an unlikely candidate for the deconstruction of Japanese ideas about the face and its bearer, the person: it comes from the Italic city of Pompeii. There, in the House of the Ephebe (otherwise known as the House of Publius Cornelius Tages) there is a fresco: Narcissus, detached from the world, sits in front of his reflection, and the sad nymph, Echo, stands behind his back. This picture has represented in the visual, artistically expressive, and laconic form, possibly, most characteristically and perfectly, the attitude to oneself and the Other, typical to the Occidental world. It was not just one of the hundreds of personages of the ancient myths who has been reflected in the mirror of the calm water. It was, in a way, an invariant model of the paradigmatic situation: a man turning away from another person in order to interact with his own self (Ill. 1).

In ancient Japan, there was another legend about a mirror. It was in the ur-myth about the seclusion of the sun goddess Amate-

rasu in the heavenly cave putting all the heavenly realm into darkness. (She was offended by her violent brother Susanoo, the god of storms). To lure her out, other gods placed a big bronze mirror in front of her cave and began to merrily sing and dance. More precisely, it was a minor divinity, Ame no Uzume no Mikoto, who performed an ecstatic shamanic dance, during which she stripped bare her breasts and genitals, thus provoking the assembled gods into a burst of thunder-like laughter. Amaterasu surprised that, notwithstanding her seclusion, people outside were evidently having a good time, opened the door ajar and peeked outside. She noticed her reflection in the mirror and was astonished to find that there was another sun in the heavens besides her. She wanted to find out who the impostor was, stepped outside, and was happily greeted by an assembly of gods. The sunlight and the order of cosmic things were restored[1]. We can see in this myth a peculiar feature of the Japanese mind: to see the Other in oneself, not oneself in the Other (Ill. 2).

In commemoration of this event, this (or believed to be this) mirror, Yata no Kagami, is honored as the most sacred part of the Three Imperial Regalia (the other two are the sword and holy jades) (Ill. 3).

A mirror occupies a prominent place in Japanese myths and cultural imagination. In many narratives, it was endowed with a supernatural role to reveal the inner essence which lies beyond the outer appearance. For instance, there is an old legend about the famous and hellishly beautiful courtesan Jigoku-dayu. Her name means A Courtesan from Hell, and she was infamous for her sick and cruel character. One morning, as she was sitting in front of the mirror beautifying herself, she saw a grinning skull instead of a reflection of herself. Jigoku-dayu understood that it was her real essence, and the vision made such a dramatic impression by visualizing her imminent ugly future that she turned to Buddhism[2] (Ill. 4).

1. See D. Philippi, transl. *Kojiki*, Princeton 2015, 82-84.
2. See this story in Santo Kyoden, *Honchosui Bodai Zenden* 本朝酔菩提全伝 (The Complete Story of the Drunken Enlightenment of Our Country), Edo 1808. Folio 9r (no pagination). https://www2.dhii.jp/nijl/kanzo/iiif/200010560/images/200010560_00003.jpg It was a popular subject in wood-

The ultimate state of mind, free from thinking about self, or in other words, free from personal feelings like craving or smugness, the Buddhist idea of *muga* (無我, non-I, no-self) has been expressed in the image of the empty mirror. This notion correlates with sayings in early Chinese Chan koans about the original face: «What did your face look like before your parents were born?» (*Mumonkan*, case 23)[3]. Visually, this original face could be depicted as an empty circle (*enso* 円相) (Ill. 5). This subject was and still is very popular in Zen-related circles. Returning to the empty mirror, we can recall the words of one Zen master of the mid-20th century who said to his disciple: «The empty mirror», he said. «If you could really understand that, there would be nothing left here for you to look for»[4]. After being directed to look into a mirror to find his real face, a disciple can succeed in doing so only when he sees that the mirror is empty. Outer features are not substantial. As a poetic parallel to this, we can recall the line of Alexander Blok: «Сотри случайные черты» («Erase these accidental features […]»)[5].

Seeing the empty mirror in life or depicting an empty circle enso in art, was a rather advanced level of spirituality appropriate for religious figures well advanced in meditative practices. For lay people there existed more mundane but no less conventional stylistic devices used for the depiction of faces. The first, and one of the most prominent, has been known from the time of classical antiquity (Heian epoch, 8-12 cc.). It was called *hikime kagibana* 引目鈎鼻 (lit. «slit eyes, hooked nose»). On the famous pictorial scroll, with scenes from the novel *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji Monogatari* by Murasaki Shikibu, early 11th c.), this representational convention is clearly visible. While there are some minuscule differences in depicting noses and eyes yield to the discerning gaze of a connoisseur, they could be going from the subtle

block prints in the 19th century. See the more detailed account in E. Steiner, *Zen-Life: Ikkyu and Beyond*, Newcastle 2014, 159-60.

3. On the original face see: Sekida, Katsuki, transl., *Two Zen Classics: Mumonkan and Hekiganroku*, New York, 1977, 81084. Available online with the original Chinese text at https://terebess.hu/zen/SekidaMumonkan.pdf

4. J. van de Wetering, *The Empty Mirror: Experiences in a Japanese Zen Monastery*, New York 1987, 125.

5. A. Blok, Poem «Vozmezdie» (Retribution). Prologue, line 11.

individual movements of the brush rather than from the goal to catch a verisimilitude. More than that: it was a unisex convention: in most cases, women differ from men by their hairdo but not facial features (Ill. 6, 7).

This mode of face representation was perennial throughout the history of traditional Japanese art, even when artistic styles and cultural environment changed. A few hundred centuries later the same artistic principles have been applied in the prints of the ukiyo-e school. From the classical Heian era scrolls, after about five or six centuries, the audience greatly changed from the viewpoint of cultural and social background, but the way of the depiction of human faces remained basically intact. The face was the depiction of certain invariant features based on the ideas of eternal beauty (fierce masculinity) rather than on human individuality. As telling examples, we can look at such images related to Genji Monogatari, as an imaginary portrait of Murasaki Shikibu by the prominent artist Tosa Mitsuyuki (17th c.), and a depiction of one of the prominent characters from this novel, the lady Kiritsubo, drawn by a leading master of the early 19th c. Torii Kiyonaga (Ill. 8, 9). The first worked for an aristocratic audience producing paintings, the second made designs for color woodblock prints that were popular, predominantly, amongst commoners.

One might object that this principle of the depiction of faces was a peculiar feature for aristocratic subjects, who inherited the long and venerated tradition going back to ancient times. This may be so, but as a matter of fact, a similar convention was in play when it came to the visualization of contemporary beauties of humble origin in the popular pictures of the Floating World (*ukiyo-e*). Utamaro's parodic composition, where seven fashionable courtesans are meant to embody the Seven Gods of good luck, perfectly conforms to the idea of «slit eyes and hooked noses» (Ill. 10). It is interesting that in the 19th century, a few isolated voices of artists who were ahead of their time (and not without any influence from the West) expressed their disagreement with the uniformity of noses. It was Hokusai (1760-1849) who wrote a letter to his block cutter, Sugita Kinsuke, arguing that the latter did not cut eyes and noses which precisely fol-

lowed Hokusai's master drawings, demanding that Sugita should recut these parts to comply with Hokusai's personal style[6].

Evidently, the cutter tried to make his work simpler by moving his chisel in the traditional way.

However, Hokusai was not only referring to depictions of young women with their stereotypical likenesses. He also drew hundreds, if not thousands, of faces of simple folk from all walks of life during their mundane activity, joys, and problems. In so doing, a certain level of facial diversity with a rich mimic reflecting diverse emotions was presumable and unavoidable. In this respect, Hokusai continued an old tradition going back to the late classical and early medieval epochs (Heian and Kamakura, 12-14 cc.) of the depiction of peasants and commoners, servants and workers. In all scrolls descending from those times, we can see a dynamic representation of human figures: running, gesticulating, laughing, and screaming. Faces are often distorted, grotesque, and seemingly individualistic looking. For example, a group of people running behind a flying granary in the Tabikura episode of the handscroll, «Legends about a Temple of Mt. Shigi»[7], are all shown with their eyes bulging in astonishment and gaping mouths or their jaws dropping – but all this is just a different pictorial convention that was used in the subjects of this style (dynamic outdoor scenes in «masculine pictures» or *otoko-e*). No attempts – or very little – have been made to infuse discernible individual features into these faces (Ill. 11).

Other Japanese traditional art forms demonstrated similar forms of treatment of human faces. In the Noh theater (14th century on), the face of an actor is simply concealed by a mask, established once and for all for that character (a young woman, an old man, a demon, etc.). Yet, the connoisseurs believe that Noh masks have their own expression, which depends on the lighting and subtle movements of an actor. Possibly, Oscar Wilde

6. See E. Tinios, «Hokusai and his Blockcutters», *Print Quarterly*. Vol. XXXII, No. 2 (2015), 186-91.

7. 信貴山縁起絵巻 («Shigisan engi emaki»), 12 c., Chogosonji monastery, Nara.

with his witticism, «A mask tells us more than a face», under-stood this[8].

In the Kabuki theater, which historically came later than Noh, in the 17th century, there were no masks. In lieu of them, a thick layer of makeup, either white for female roles or with bright stripes for heroes or villains, made real faces hidden behind a mask-like cover. This form of face painting is called *kumadori* and is used in *aragoto* («rough, wild, exaggerated») style plays (Ill. 12). The colors of the background (usually white) and various pat-terns have their symbolic meaning and indicate traits of character (strength, ferocity, meanness, etc.). It all virtually excludes the face from playing any significant role in performing the charac-ter's inner world, his progress, and emotional state. To render all these, the actors of Noh and Kabuki use extra-physiognomic devices: gestures, posture, various props (fans, etc.).

The art of portraiture in traditional Japan was developed much less than the landscape genre. Nevertheless, there were two major forms of the depiction of human faces: secular and religious.

Medieval portraits of lay figures (courtiers and samurai) were called *nise-e* 似絵 – «a precise, realistic depiction» or «the likeness pictures». This «likeness» notwithstanding, it is good to remember that the word «nise» means not only «a copy» but also «false» or «imitation». To give a better idea of the range of meaning of the word nise there is a very popular novel by Ryutei Tanehiko (1783-1842) *Nise Murasaki Inaka Genji* («Fraudulent Murasaki and Rustic Genji» serialized in 1829-42): a parodic rendering of the classical novel brushed by Murasaki Shikibu. Portraits in this genre were official, dry, and pompous, with meticulously ren-dered ceremonial garb and schematic expressionless faces (Ill. 13).

On the other hand, portraits, or *chinzo* (from Ch. *dingxiang* 頂相), formal depictions of Zen masters, were considered to be not just true images or exact verisimilitudes of their sitters, but the mate-rial bearers of their dharma which emanated from the chinzo in his absence or long after his death.

The chinzo genre practically did not use an expressive modi-fication of nature to emphasize its aesthetic or psychological

8. O. Wilde, *Intentions*, Portland (Maine) 1904, 57.

dimension. All the faces of Zen prelates on these portraits are emotionless, dry, calm, and neutral. The outlines are monotonous and even, without any attempts to add any painterly expressivity. This artistic language (resembling a snapshot for documents) resulted from the pragmatic function of chinzo – to represent a master's persona, which means a source of dharma emission. It was also supposed to be a model for disciples during the master's life, and a sacral object – body substitute – after the master's death. In this capacity, chinzo played a significant role in the mortuary practices, representing the newly deceased master at funeral services. These portraits were placed above the master's coffin for a period of three days after his demise.

In this respect, chinzo portraits radically differ from nise-e portraits. In other words, the latter is the opposite of chinzō, which were also called *keshin* 掛真 – «the hung truth, or reality». As Bernard Faure wrote, «As a religious icon, the portrait was functionally equivalent to the relics, the mummies, or the stupas: it meant the presence of the Buddha in his very absence»[9]. In their capacity of sacred relics, chinzo served the purpose of replacing the portrayed master with a supernatural aura attributed to them and not because of their striking likeness with the sitter[10] (Ill. 14).

Actually, this likeness and sometimes very close verisimilitude, often provoked the «negative verisimilitude», as Yukio Lippit branded it in his essay about chinzo. Often the model, who was portrayed in this realistically executed chinzo, in his poetic inscription (which was a ritualistic part of the whole scroll – without it the object was considered unfinished) expressed a self-deprecating attitude, humbly denying the connection of the painted grandeur with his face as he saw it himself. Lippit called it «a negative verisimilitude». In his essay about chinzo, he wrote that there was a «fundamental tension between the high degree

9. B. Faure, «Chan and Zen Studies: The state of the field(s)», in *Chan Buddhism in Ritual Context*. Ed. by B. Faure. London and New York 2003, 17.

10. See my article about chinzo and verisimilitude: «Zen Portraits Chinzō: Why do They Look as They do?», *Orientalia et Classica*, papers of the Inst. of Oriental and Classical Studies (Rus. State Univ. for the Human-ities), vol. LI, Moscow 2013, 187-99. Олег, надо ли это уточнение?

of pictorial realism and the accompanying inscription that rhetor-
ically condemns it. Indeed, the often-extraordinary degree of
verisimilitude seen in the self-inscribed chinso was predicated this
kind of discursive negation»[11]. Going back to our main subject –
the human face and its understanding and representation – we
can stress that a self-deprecating (and sometimes self-mocking)
attitude to realistically rendered portraits proves our key thesis
about the negative or no interest in the individuality of faces.

One more argument for the idea that the physical (and/or
optical) features of the face were sometimes not important at all
is evident in a very specific and little-known genre: transfigura-
tional portraits of Zen masters. When they believed that they
were a reincarnation of a certain prominent master from the
past, their disciples could have their portrait executed in the
likeness of that long time dead person. Four of such transfigura-
tional portraits were created for Ikkyu Sojun (1394-1481), where
he has been represented in the guise of the Chinese master
Xutang Zhiyu (Jap. Kido Chigu, 1183/85-1269), from whom
Ikkyu believed he was a seventh generation spiritual descendant.
In the Zen circles, these pictures have been called «portraits of
the second arrival» (*sairaizo* 再来像)[12] – or, they can bear the
common name «transfiguration portrait» (*hen'yaku chinzo*)[13].

Given the particular details of the origins of this iconographic
type (Ikkyu saw himself blended with Xutang in his dream), it was
called «a portrait [seen] in a dream» (*muchuzo* 夢中像)[14] (Ill. 15).

A significant impact on the Japanese art of portraiture and on
understanding a face was made by the ancient Chinese teaching
of physiognomy. Treatises on how to make a portrait were well
known and used in painters' practice. One of such texts belongs
to an artist of the Yuan dynasty, Wang Yi (14 c.), and is titled *The*

11. Yu. Lippit, «Negative Verisimilitude: The Zen Portrait in Medieval
Japan», in *Asian Art History*. Ed. by Vishakha Desai. Williamstown, MA
20075, 64-95.

12. See *Ikkyū Sōjun shinsekishū* 一休宗純真蹟集 (Ikkyu Sojun: The collec-
tion of authentic works). Ed. Yamada Sobin. Tokyo 1980, s.p., text alongside
pl. 7.

13. See H. Brinker, *Die Zenbuddhisthische bildnismalerei in China und
Japan*, Wiesbaden 1973, 84-90.

14. See more on this in: Steiner, *Zen-Life*, 351-54.

*Old Secrets of Portrait Painting* (写像古訣 *Sezhen gujue*). He writes: «Drawing a portrait, first of all, pay attention to the eight types (八种 *bazhong*)», then look at «the three courts (三庭 *santing*)». Eyes, horizontally, make «five congruences», and the mouth forms about «three equations». (Of course, there were no inverted commas in the original text: the educated reader was supposed to know what these terms meant and where they came from.) It all refers to the ancient rules of physiognomy. «Eight types» means making a face similar to one of eight Chinese glyphs (characters): field, reason, country, use, shell, eye, wind, and monkey (田、由、国、用、甲、目、風、申). «Three courts» means a forehead (upper court), the length of a nose (middle court), and the length between the nose and the chin (lower court), and so on[15].

However, closer to the end of the premodern era, physiognomy in Japan was not used predominantly as a painters' guide but as a tool for diagnosing all kinds of internal diseases. The face was presumed to express various subtle indications of medical problems. Magnifying glasses, called *tengankyo* (天眼鏡, lit. «heavenly eye mirror»), served for close observation in such a way as a blood test or MRI serve to modern day doctors (Ill. 16).

One of the last observations we can make is by comparing two works by the preeminent artist of Medieval Japan, Sesshu Toyo (1420-1506). The first is his self-portrait (ca. 1491), which shows a detached and emotionless, unexpressive, generic face, drawn by even thin lines – in other words, a typical portrait of those times. The artistic style of this portrait is dramatically different from his famous landscape executed in the style of splashed ink (haboku sansui, 1495). This is a semi-abstract painting with a broad variety of brushstrokes, from violent to gentle, and the rich gamut of ink shades, from watery pale to intensive black. This landscape is more revealing of the inner world and emotional state of its artist than his sober and withdrawn self-representation of his own likeness. Placing these two paintings

15. See Chinese text: http://renxueyanjiu.com/index.php?m=content&c=index&a=show&catid=70&id=2152 (from the book: Shi Zhongwen and Hu Xiaolin, *The History of Chinese Books on Art of Yuan Dynasty* (史仲文, 胡晓林 «中国全史百卷本元朝艺术史»), Beijing 1994.

side by side, we see a juxtaposition of a bland face and an animated landscape. I would call this cultural trait a landscape vision when a pictorial representation of natural scenery appears to be a non-anthropomorphic portrait of its creator[16] (Ill. 17, 18).

Drawing a conclusion of this short essay, we should assert that the idea of a face as a mirror of the soul was alien in traditional Japan, or, broader, in the East Asian Sinosphere. A notion close to Cicero's *Imago animi vultus est* was basically alien to this type of culture. The face was not an index of the mind, and in a culture, where the ideal of an individual was the Buddhist concept of muga (no-self), there could not appear anything compatible to an understanding of a man as *copula mundi* or Marcilio Ficino and other Renaissance humanists, brilliantly expressed in the art of portraiture.

Knowing that all generalizations are prone to certain simplifications (and these days, the fashionable 'new critique' branded it 'essentialism'), we still dare to suggest that the attitude to a face, delineated above, has resulted in a few implications that defined the culture:

1. A less developed (compared with landscape) art of portraiture.

2. No idea of personality as a unique and independent actor.

3. No humanism compatible with European thought and cultural trends.

4. Better interindividual and social cohesion; societal attitude on collectivity and mutuality.

16. I have used this expression, 'non-anthropomorphic portrait' (in Russian *neantropomorfny portret*), since the late 1970s when I first coined it in one of my course-works. Surprisingly, a Google check has brought virtually no hits. (In English, it appears but in one book, published in 2019.) At the same time, the idea of isomorphism (or analogy) of microcosm and macrocosm is universal from the antiquity, West and East. Interestingly enough, similar ideas, consonant to the present essay, were expressed by the scholar of a face, Massimo Leone, at an event held concurrently with our conference: at the symposium *The Semiotics of Cultural Heritage; Special Focus: Representing the Face across History and Civilizations*, Shanghai University, July 1-2, 2019. His keynote address was published later: M. Leone, «The Singular Countenance: The Visage as Landscape, the Landscape as Visage», *Language and Semiotic Studies*, 5,4 (2019), 28-46.

ABSTRACT

Evgeny Steiner, *Faces Without Individualization: The Art of Portraiture in Premodern Japan*

The present essay discusses the general ideas concerning the human face and, by extension, the notion of human individuality in traditional Japanese culture. The material for the analysis is borrowed from the diversity of literary, mythological, and, most prominently, pictorial sources spanning through the various epochs in the history of Japan.

The conclusion can be summarized as a set of characteristics spanning through various epochs of Japanese art and culture:

1. A less developed (compared with landscape) art of portraiture.

2. No idea of personality as a unique and independent actor.

3. No humanism compatible with European thought and cultural trends.

4. Better interindividual and social cohesion; societal attitude on collectivity and mutuality.

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Fig. 1. Narcissus and Echo. A fresco in the House of the Ephebe, Pompeii. 1 c. CE.



Fig. 2. Amaterasu Emerging from the Heavenly Grotto (Origin of the Cave Door Dance). Artist Shunsai Toshimasa. Woodblock print. 1889.

Fig. 3. Yata no Kagami, the sacred mirror.



Fig. 5. Empty Circle Enso. Contemporary painting.



Fig. 4. Courtesan Jigokudayu Seeing a Skeleton in the Mirror. Artist Tsukioka Yoshitoshi. Woodblock print. 1882.

Fig. 6. Faces in Genji–monogatari scroll. Sketches.



Fig. 7. Faces in Genji–monogatari handscroll. Paper, ink, light colors. Ca. 1120–40.

Fig. 8. Ono no Komachi. Artist Torii Kiyonaga. Woodblock print. 1784.

Fig. 9. Murasaki Shikibu. Artist Tosa Mitsuyuki. Silk, colors. 17ᵗʰ c.



Fig. 10. Seven Beauties as Seven Gods of Luck. Artist Kitagawa Utamaro. 1793-94.

Fig. 11. A flying granary. Episode of the handscroll "Legends about a Temple of Mt. Shigi". Paper, ink, light colors. 12 c.



Fig. 12. Kumadori makeup. Actor Actor Ichikawa Danjuro V as Kazusa no Gorobei Tadamitsu. Artist Katsukawa Shunko. Woodblock print. 1780.

Fig. 13. Emperor Go–Komatsu. Artist unknown. Kyoto, Unryuin temple. Silk, colors. 18th c.



Fig. 14. Yoso Soi. Artist Bunsei. Silk, colors. Kyoto, Daitokuji monastery. 1452.

Fig. 15. Ikkyu as Kido. Transfiguration portrait. Silk, colors. Kyoto, Shinjuan temple. 15<sup>th</sup> c.



Fig. 16. Physiognomy. Hokusai Manga, vol. 12, f. 12r. 19<sup>th</sup> c.

Fig. 17. Sesshu, self-portrait. Silk, colors. A copy of the 16th c.



Fig. 18. Sesshu. A Landscape. Paper, ink. Tokyo, National Museum. 1495.