

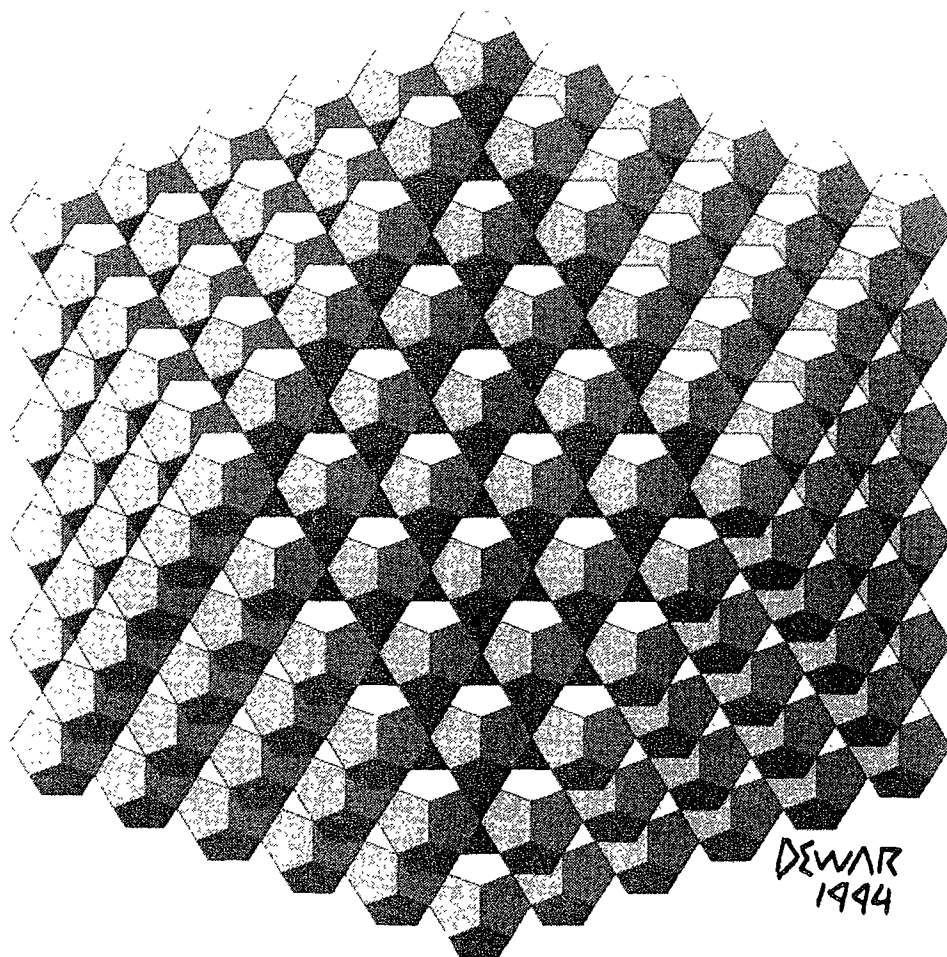
# Symmetry: Culture and Science

Symmetry:  
Natural and Artificial, 2

The Quarterly of the  
International Society for the  
Interdisciplinary Study of Symmetry  
(ISIS-Symmetry)

Editors:  
György Darvas and Dénes Nagy

Volume 6, Number 2, 1995



Third Interdisciplinary Symmetry Congress and Exhibition  
Washington, D.C., U.S.A. August 14 - 20, 1995

“THE PROPER” AND “THE REVERSED”:  
RIGHT-HANDED DYNAMISM  
IN THE JAPANESE TEA CEREMONY AND *NOH*

Etsuko Kato

Department of English Language, Shion Junior College  
1458-4 Nakao, Urawa, Saitama 336 JAPAN

0. On the circular stage or the square one—Western performance art has been developed in symmetrical space, where distinction between right and left is made simply for the sake of convenience. There is no rule, for example, that prohibits an actor, who stood on the right side of the stage yesterday, from standing on the left side today. In this sense, in symmetrical space, right and left are interchangeable.

Two of the typical Japanese performance art, the tea ceremony and *noh*, however, are performed in asymmetrical space, and therefore ruled by the right-and-left orientation; in this case right and left are interchangeable, each having its own value. In this presentation, we will examine how the asymmetric structures of the performance space of these two types of art are linked with the performances themselves in inseparable ways.

1. The tea ceremony and *noh* are both established in the 16th century and are still great enjoyments to the Japanese. The tea ceremony is the art of making and drinking tea through an elegantly formulated procedure in specially-made tearoom. Figure 1 shows the structure of the most basic,

formal tearoom. The tearoom can be square, but its layout is not symmetrical in a narrow sense; moreover, placement of the participants and utensils, which are strictly rule-governed, seems as if it aimed to break symmetry.

This holds true of the stage of *noh*, which is a kind of musical art developed from religious dances in shrines. Figure 2 shows the layout in the theater and the placement of performers on the stage, all of which are not symmetrical.

Such asymmetrical structures of the tearoom and the *noh* stage can be considered as the representation of unique preference of the Japanese. Indeed, the preference for asymmetry is generally seen in Japanese art and architecture. To be exact, what the Japanese prefer is not asymmetry, which means total lack of symmetry, but higher level of symmetry, which can be called *dynamic symmetry* (cf. Nagy (personal communication) and Konparu (1980:34)).

In the case of the tearoom and the *noh* stage, however, there is another characteristic they share which should not be overlooked when we remember they are kinds of space for performance: i.e. both in the tearoom and the *noh* stage, the space on the right side of the main performer (the host / the actor) is open, and the left side is closed. Is there any positive motivation for them to have such a right-hand-open structure?

2. What is suggestive in answering this question is a historical fact that

both the tearoom and the *noh* stage had their “reversed” versions of the layouts which we have today. Figure 3 shows the difference between two of the layouts of tearooms which we call “the proper” today and their “reversed” versions. A “reversed” tearoom has a layout which is like a mirror-image of the “proper” one, and so is its placement of the participants and utensils. As for the *noh* stage, it also had the “reversed” version, in which the cloister was attached to the left side of the main stage.

Nowadays there are no “reversed” *noh* stages; and the “reversed” tearooms are rare. The possible reason of this “natural selection” may be that most people are right-handed, and “the proper” allows the main performer to show the side of his dominant hand to the people who watch him. This is effective for the beauty of the performance, because the dominant hand is likely to hold implements—beautiful utensils or stage properties. In the case of the tea ceremony, this is practical as well, because if the right hand of the host is close to the guests, it is easier for him to serve tea or offer utensils for a closer view to the guests.

3. Thus, based upon Japanese preference for dynamic symmetry, right-hand-oriented space for performance was born and remained as long as 400 years. Today, when we enjoy the performances in the tearoom or the *noh* theater, we may feel right-handed (i.e. clockwise) dynamism imposed on us; in the tea ceremony, we see the host enters the tearoom, sits and makes tea, offers the cup to the guests sitting on his right side, and the guests pass the

cup from hand to hand as they drink tea from it, then the last guest gives it back to the host; and all these movements draw a clockwise circle.

Or in the performance of *noh*, every time an actor appears at the edge of the cloister, comes up to the main stage, turn to the right at the corner of it and steps forward to face the audience seated in front, the audience may feel a clockwise “vector” comes from the stage toward them, which continues to draw a clockwise circle all over the theater.

Reference

Konparu, Kunio. *Noh eno shotai* [Invitation to Noh]. Kyoto: Tankosha, 1980.

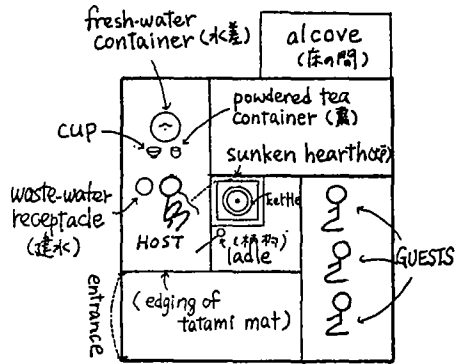


Figure 1 ▲

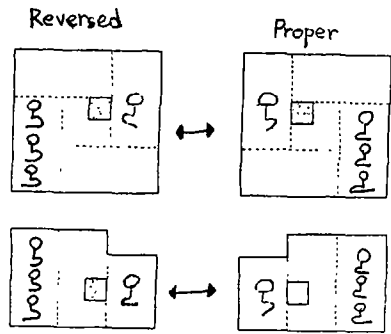


Figure 3 ▲

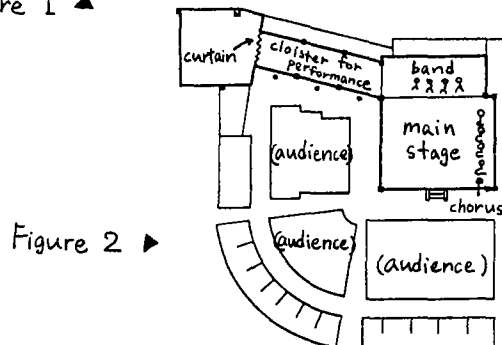


Figure 2 ▶