

*Nature in Ikebana (Japanese Flower Arrangement):
The Freestyle Ikebana Movement in the 1920's and 1930's,
and Its Effect on Avant-Garde Ikebana After the War*

Shoso Shimbo, RMIT University, Australia

The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2020
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Western culture, in particular the Modernism Art Movement has had a significant influence on the radical Freestyle Ikebana Movement (FIM) in the 1920's and 1930's. This paper is an introduction to my main research, and focuses on the socio-cultural contexts of the FIM rather than a philosophical analysis of its content. It also looks into how this cultural change can be explained by Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural transformation. The FIM and Avant-garde Ikebana after the war are generally regarded as closely connected, sharing the same ideologies, with the former heralding the latter. Noting that the FIM was a movement against nationalistic ikebana at that time, however, this study suggests that the FIM and Avant-garde Ikebana belong to contrasting culture fields with different interests.

Keywords: Ikebana, The Freestyle Ikebana Movement, Avant-Garde Ikebana, Cultural Change, Modernism, Fascism In Japan, Cultural Nationalism

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Research on the current environmental crisis we face today cannot avoid enquiry into our relationship with nature. In the history of ikebana, our relationship with nature was hotly debated by those who were involved with the Freestyle Ikebana Movement (FIM) in the 1920's and 1930's. The FIM was initiated by the impact of Western Modernism. Within the FIM there are two contrasting approaches to nature: nature as material for art and nature as a wholistic entity. The study of these contrasting attitudes is significant because it reveals not only how the Japanese dealt with the impact of Western Modernism on our perception of nature but also what influence ikebana can have on our attitude to the environment today. Both aspects are important in considering the possible role of ikebana as environmental art.

Rather than the contents of the FIM, however, this paper focuses on its external factors such as the socio-cultural and historical contexts. Consequently, the conflicting attitudes within the FIM are disregarded intentionally. Applying some aspects of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural change, this study re-examines the features of the FIM in its relationship to the dominant state of ikebana in the 1930's and post-war Avant-garde Ikebana, which is generally regarded as the direct successor of the FIM (Hojo, 1964; Inoue, 2016).

Research Questions

1. Why did the peak of the FIM occur in the 1930's?
2. How did external social forces, fascism in particular, influence the cultural change in Japan?
3. What is the relationship between the FIM before the war and Avant-garde Ikebana after the war?

Japan in the 1930's

Throughout the 1920s, various nationalistic and xenophobic ideologies emerged among right-wing Japanese intellectuals, but it was not until the early 1930s that these ideas became part of the mainstream political landscape. During the 1930s, political totalitarianism, ultranationalism, and fascism became the dominant narratives, culminating in Japan's invasion of China in 1937. At the same time Japan in the 1930's needs to be regarded as a modern civil society.

Even as military and bureaucratic spokesmen along with right-wing activists ratcheted up their calls for a 'return to tradition' in the face of what they characterised as a crisis of national spiritual morale, and even as crackdowns against leftists, liberals, 'modern women', and so-called betrayers of the national essence intensified, the period through the mid-1930s witnessed an ongoing cosmopolitan popular integration with, and consumption of, the fashions and fruits of global capitalist modernity (Mark 2017: 249).

During this period between the two wars, there were significant changes in many culture fields as well as society in Japan. In general, many traditional art forms took on the dominant nationalistic political ideologies of the state. One of the most obvious cases was observed in the tea ceremony. Surak (2011) analysed how tea was proffered

as a *vade mecum* for the state-supported idea of a “good wife and wise mother” in the nation-making atmosphere of the late Meiji period (1868 - 1912). It was proclaimed that tea contains the essence of the national spirit and ethics of a good imperial subject. At the height of Japanese expansions, the head of a school of tea ceremony, the *iemoto*, made efforts to promote the concept of tea for the nation, which garnered broad public attention through the media.

Ikebana in the 1930's

Ikebana went through a similar cultural transformation. Inoue (2016) noted that the most obvious phenomenon of ikebana in the Taisho period (1912 - 26) and the early Showa period (1926 - 1989) was its popularisation. Socio-economic modernisation as well as the development of the mass media gave rise to a large number of cultural consumers. Just like tea, ikebana was generally regarded as part of marriage training to become a “good wife and wise mother” and a good imperial subject. It was consequently very popular among young women in the marriage market. Furthermore, suppliers of ikebana advocated ikebana as a nationalistic art, “*kokusui geijutsu*”, and a spiritual training, “*seishin shuyo*”, which were seen as necessary for the Japanese facing the war in order to encourage a spirit of endurance that would overcome hardship and lead the nation to victory (Kobayashi, 2007 & 2015; Inoue, 2011). In the mental aspect of ikebana training, therefore, personal development, “*jinkaku no toya*” was linked to the development of national character, “*kokuminsei*”.

It was under such preconditions that the FIM developed in the 1920's and 1930's. In fact it is reasonable to assume that the transformation of ikebana under fascism was a major reason why the FIM developed. Both significant leaders of the FIM, Shigemori Mirei (1896 - 1975) and Yamane Suido (1893 - 1975) attacked ikebana as practiced at that time. Shigemori stated that nothing lacks artistic faith as much as contemporary ikebana, and Yamane regarded ikebana in the Meiji and Taisho periods as “dead flowers” (Inoue, 2011).

The most important milestones in the emergence of the new movement were the drafting of the New Ikebana Declaration by Shigemori in circa 1929, the publication of Neo Dadaism Flower Arrangement by Shigemori in 1933 and the publication of several articles by Yamane attacking Shigemori in 1934. Although the modernist Shigemori and the traditionalist Yamane criticised each other in public and presented contrasting views about new ikebana, it is reasonable to assume that they belong to the same culture field in the light of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural change. Detailed analysis of their arguments, in particular the significance of their attitudes to nature in the history of ikebana will be discussed in another paper.

Bourdieu's theory is that cultural changes result from the struggle for distinction by both cultural producers and consumers (1996). He defines the culture field as the site of production of cultural goods that the different classes appropriate and employ in their struggles for legitimating distinction. In his discussion about cycles of artistic innovation, Bourdieu divides the cultural field into two competing subfields, each with structurally defined producers and consumers. The subfield of restricted production is composed of the high arts in which the stakes are not economic but symbolic profits, that is, recognition by other artists on the basis of autonomous standards of art. This subfield is divided into the consecrated avant-garde and the

unknown avant-garde. The other subfield of the cultural field is that of mass production. This subfield is divided into bourgeois art and commercial art. The producers of commercial art have less cultural capital and their goods tend to be mass produced “kitsch”.

Bourdieu then points out that artistic innovation moves from one subcategory to another. It starts at the bottom of the restricted subfield among unknown avant-garde artists, rises to the top of this subfield as works of the consecrated avant-garde, and then migrates laterally to the top of the large-scale subfield as bourgeoisie art, until imitation by the petty bourgeoisie lowers them to the status of commercial art (Bourdieu 1996: 121).

BOURDIEU’S THEORY OF CULTURAL CHANGE

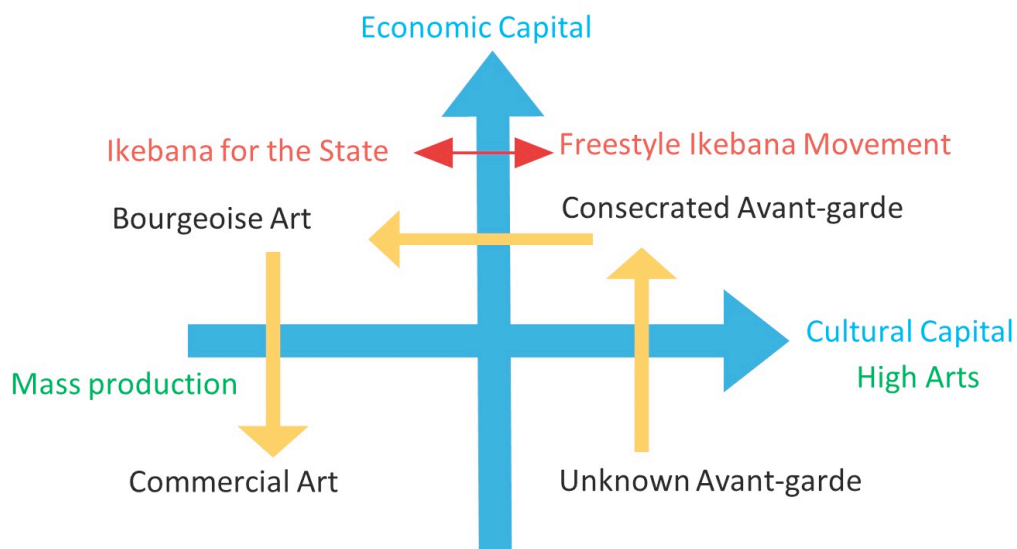


Fig. 1. Bourdieu’s theory of cultural change: Ikebana before the war

FIM in Cycles

As a well known art critic, Shigemori had attracted many progressive ikebana artists who developed and Avant-garde Ikebana after the war. With several publications and over 200 students, Yamane was a financially successful ikebana artist. Therefore, the FIM led by both Shigemori and Yamane in the 1930’s can be categorised into a restricted field which was competing with another subfield of ikebana that included ikebana taught for the sake of the state (Fig.1). It is easy to recognise that there was a struggle for cultural capital between the established and the FIM as a challenger.

Both Shigemori and Yamane, as members of the intellectual bourgeoisies, displayed their pure, disinterested taste and knowledge through the high arts, which were governed by rules removed from the crass logic of the marketplace in the 1930’s. In

other words, their artistic tastes or concerns had little to do with nationalistic ideologies that were dominant in the traditional culture at that time. Instead, their cultural capital was influenced by Western Modernism, although they each focused on different aspects of it.

Another notable aspect of the FIM is that next stage in the cycle of artistic innovation, the adaptation of the cultural capital of the FIM by the economic bourgeoisie, did not happen immediately due to World War II (1939 - 45).

Ikebana after the War

Shigemori's New Ikebana Declaration was not published in the end, but it had significant influence on leading ikebana artists after the war. Among those were Sofu Teshigahara (1900 - 1979) and Houn Ohara (1908 - 1995), two headmasters of the largest ikebana schools, and both were involved in drafting the New Ikebana Declaration before the war. They promoted ikebana as a new art, repudiating traditional ikebana. In particular, Sofu's statements on ikebana reveal a strong influence from Shigemori. It is plausible that the cycle of artistic innovation does not necessarily occur between two cultural fields simultaneously, but with some time lag.

Avant-garde Ikebana led by Sofu and Houn among others became extremely popular very quickly, attracting large numbers of students and wealth to their schools. The ikebana boom was a remarkable social phenomenon, and according to some unverifiable reports there were five million practitioners at that time. Among various factors to contribute to the ikebana boom was support from the Japanese government at the time. Some traditionalist aesthetic values lent themselves well to the efforts of the post war 'liberal democratic state' to present to the world at large the image of a new Japan, peace-loving and aesthetic rather than militaristic, imperialistic and fascist. The unprecedented popularity of ikebana resulted in greater competition among suppliers of culture. Large schools' imitation of the high arts inevitably lowers them to the status of bourgeoisie-art works in the large scale subfield, the cultural field of mass production. Once a headmaster incorporated a new style, it was generally imitated by thousands of students in his or her school.

The original avant-garde ikebana theorists and practitioners did not have much to do with Avant-garde Ikebana after the war. Shigemori gradually shifted his focus from ikebana to garden design. He designed 240 gardens in his lifetime after 1939 and he is generally regarded as the most important garden designer in Showa period. Yamane was regarded as a lone conservative and retired from the active ikebana world, commenting that many contemporary ikebana practitioners seem to be removed from the way of the flower.

As Bourdieu states, there is competition and struggle among cultural producers in the field of mass production to distinguish themselves and legitimate their economic capital. Competition for distinction was likely an incentive for ikebana schools to select and borrow more distinctive forms of high art that were exclusively consumed by the intellectual bourgeoisie.

After exploiting the original FIM, the large ikebana schools turned their interest directly to Western contemporary art that was seen as possessing a pure, disinterested

aura of art. Surrealism, Object and other trends were introduced just like fashion and incorporated into ikebana one after another. With greater competition between cultural suppliers, they were motivated to quickly bring distinctive cultural products to the lower classes. Consequently, the cycle of innovation got shorter.

IKEBANA AFTER THE WAR

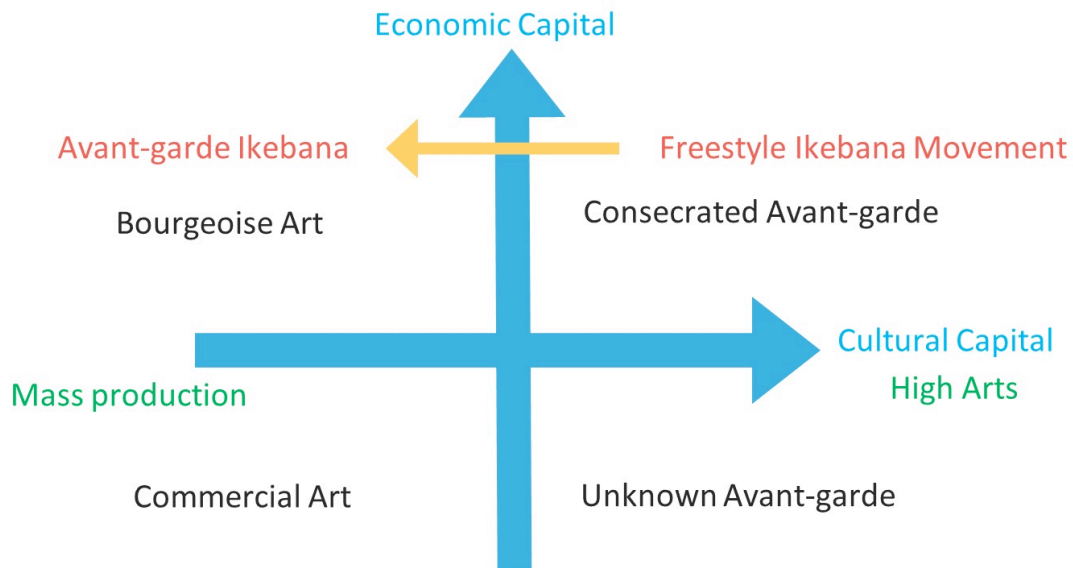


Fig.2. Bourdieu's theory of cultural change: Ikebana after the war

It is clear from the above description that the strategies Avant-garde Ikebana used were those of bourgeois art in the cultural field of mass production. Although Avant-garde Ikebana is regarded as the direct successor and actualisation of the FIM (Hojo, 1964), it is reasonable to assume that they belong to the contrasting cultural fields in term of the cycles of artistic innovation (Fig.2). The FIM had more features in common with avant-garde art than Avant-garde Ikebana.

While this is not the focus of this paper, it is interesting to note that Japanese culture had an enduring influence on Western art, not to mention Japonism, and some avant-garde movements were influenced by Japanese traditional art. It's possible that in some way Japan's modern artists as well as some ikebana artists were imitating western art that had imitated Japanese traditional art which had been rejected by Japanese modern artists (Starrs, 2011).

Conclusion

Analysis of the FIM after the 1920's demonstrates the effectiveness of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural change to a great extent. While focusing on the struggle for cultural and economic capital seems to reduce discussions about meaning and

content of cultural innovations, it reveals their dynamic relationships with the other art forms as well as with external social forces.

The cultural producers, in particular the economic bourgeoisie in the field of mass production imitate high-arts in the past or the present. In the case of large ikebana schools after the war, it is likely that easily accessible cultural capital was first found in the pre-war FIM. Once it had been exploited, they shifted their attention to contemporary Western art.

Although the connection between the pre-war FIM and post-war Avant-garde Ikebana has been emphasised in general (Hojo, 1964; Inoue, 2016), they belong to almost contrasting categories in terms of Bourdieu's theory of cultural change. While the FIM can be understood as consecrated avant-garde, Avant-garde Ikebana is best described as bourgeois art. Future research into the contents of the two contrasting approaches within the FIM in terms of the history of Japanese philosophy is required.

References

- Bourdieu, P. (1996). *The rules of art*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Gartman, D. (2002). Bourdieu's theory of cultural change: Explication, application, critique. *Sociological Theory* 20 (2), 255-277.
- Hojo, N. (1964). *What is Ikebana (Ikebana towa nanika)?* Tokyo: Kadokawa.
- Inoue, O. (2016). *Thoughts of ikebana (Kado no shiso)*. Kyoto: Shibunkaku.
- Kobayashi, Y. (2007). *Hana no seiritsu to tenkai*. Osaka: Izumi Shoin.
- Kobayashi, Y. (2015). Josei Manshu to senjika no ikebana. *Ritsumeikan daigaku kokusai gengo bunka kenkyujo*, 26 (4), 103-114.
- Mark, E. (2011). Japan's 1930s: Crisis, fascism, and social imperialism. In Saaler, S. & Szpilman, C.W.A. (Eds.), *Rutledge handbook of modern Japanese history* (pp. 237-250). Taylor & Francis Group, ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Starrs, R. (2011). *Modernism and Japanese culture*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Surak, K. (2011). From selling tea to selling Japaneseness: Symbolic power and nationalisation of cultural practices. *European Journal of Sociology*, 52 (2), 175 - 208.

Contact email: shososhimbo@gmail.com