MUJI and the Aesthetics of Simplicity: A Comparative Study on Minimalist Product Images

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Abstract
Simplicity goes beyond being a physical facet to become a cultural phenomenon. Depending on the requirement of the given moment, a certain kind of simplicity has been found or produced, and has been assigned different meanings over time. Just as simplicity, minimalism is also nonuniform. Some believe that removing unnecessary elements can serve a specific purpose, whereas others believe in the widespread acceptance of appearances without conspicuous feature. Twentieth century's claim of simplistic modern design was largely based on functionalism, which tried to design out unnecessary elements. Even today, simplicity is often argued to support optimization; however, as the number of simplified utilities increases, the market demands the perceived differentiation of products. Therefore, it has become crucial, especially now, to connote meaning to the beauty of simplicity, if not relying on styling to acquire higher sales. Moreover, more personalized products may draw greater empathetic consumers. When people are already aware of the meaning being expressed by a thing's simple appearance, they tend to find sincerity in lean constructions, humility in restrained surfaces, and tenderness in the exposure of natural materials. Since its foundation in 1980, MUJI has consistently emphasized simplicity and its own 'branding', named 'no brand', expresses a type of postmodernist minimalism. MUJI inherited the modernist requirements of simplicity, but it was not all about function tout court. MUJI aims for a simplicity that accepts all kinds of concerns while allowing several diverse meanings to be attached to the quality. Moreover, MUJI advertisements have given various meanings to simplicity in a way that has increased its familiarity. Since 2002, communication designer Kenya Hara has played a significant role in establishing MUJI's minimalist aesthetic, often referencing the rich resources of traditional Japanese culture. MUJI's product images engender a kind of modern-day Orientalism in Western countries.

Keywords: *Simplicity; Minimalism; MUJI; Kenya Hara; Aesthetics*

Introduction
A collaborative study by Japanese and German scholars, this paper explores simplicity or minimalist aesthetics. Here, the authors consider the meaning of simplicity in a transcultural context, focusing on MUJI, which is rarely highlighted in studies of design history. We can perhaps understand some aspects of minimalist aesthetic in the globalizing world by clarifying MUJI's global appeal.

The paper first focuses on Japan and then on the West. The discussion proceeds as follows. Section 2 examines the claim for MUJI's simplicity. Section 3 discusses the aesthetics of Kenya Hara, who, from 2002, played a major role in the MUJI's direction. Sections 4 and 5 offer an overview of the discovery of Japanese aesthetics of simplicity in the West and clarify how MUJI is interweaved with Japan's Western image, respectively.

MUJI's Minimalist Strategy

MUJI started in 1980 as an 'own brand' of the retail store Seiyu (1). MUJI's original concept is expressed literally by the Japanese name *Mujirushi Ryōhin*, meaning 'off-brand goods with good quality'. MUJI's policy is to follow its own path, different from engaging in styling that is solely concerned about appearances, branding that promises more fluff than value, and retail businesses that sell cheap but inferior items. It is noteworthy here that amid the postmodern consumer culture, MUJI dared to take over the modernist principle of simplicity.

MUJI's first newspaper advertisement contained the phrase 'Cheap with Good Reason' (Fig. 1), but later, MUJI refrained from marketing solely for economic reasons, placing greater emphasis on the virtue of sincerity (2). A 1981 poster expresses modesty by restricting itself to a single color on a sheet of recycled paper (Fig. 2). The copy, 'Love doesn't Decorate Itself', was accompanied by the symbolic illustration of a naked baby. That copy also corresponds to MUJI's design policy of employing simple design to manifest the texture of things.

Starting in the 1990s, Japan fell into a long depression; nevertheless, MUJI's sales increased, and the company expanded, opening more stores (3). However, around 2000, sales suddenly dropped, and in 2001, the company reorganized its operations and reaffirmed its original concept (4). In 2002, communication designer Kenya Hara joined MUJI's advisory board and immersed himself in the company's conceptual strategy.

Figure 1: (left) MUJI Poster 'Cheap with Good Reason', 1980
Figure 2: (right) MUJI Poster 'Love doesn't Decorate Itself', 1981
https://www.MUJI.com/jp/flagship/huaihai755/archive/koike.html

Figure 3: (above) MUJI Poster 'Horizon, Uyuni', 2003
Figure 4: (below) MUJI Poster 'Horizon, Mongolia', 2003
https://www.ndc.co.jp/hara/works/2018/04/MUJI-a.html

The 2003 'horizon' poster is a fine example of nihilization as the chosen landscape, virtually portrays almost nothing. In the white expanse of the Salar de Uyuni, a small figure, seen from the back, gazes into the horizon (Fig.3). In the twilight of the Mongolian plains, three small tents are lined up to potentially hover just above the horizon (Fig.4). There is no copy on the poster, let alone a product image. In the newspaper advertisement, this image of emptiness is accompanied by a lengthy text proclaiming that MUJI products are 'empty vessels' from which 'the ultimate flexibility to accept the thoughts of all people is generated' (5).

MUJI originally started with a domestic market strategy; therefore, initially, there was no brand requirement to globally promote Japan's uniqueness. Even after the company began to expand overseas, ideas for product development and images for advertisements have often been taken from vernacular lifestyles all over the world. However, in a 2005 newspaper advertisement, Hara, who is particularly attuned to traditional Japanese culture, used photos of a traditional tea ceremony room featuring a MUJI white porcelain vessel on a tatami mat (Fig.5). The text accompanying the photo praises simplicity, stating that just as the Japanese tea ceremony once brought the tearoom, utensils, and manners to the expressive peak of minimalistic beauty, MUJI aims for such high-quality simplicity, which will be effective, especially in Japan's small living spaces (6).

Figure 5: Newspaper Advertisement 'Tea Room and MUJI', 2005
https://www.ndc.co.jp/hara/works/2018/04/MUJI-a.html

MUJI has been working to simplify not only each product but also the living space where the objects are displayed. MUJI's forte is storage items that are designed to be used in combination in a modular fashion. MUJI has been trying to develop ideas of tidiness by developing a product development method based on observation (7). In 2014, an observational study was conducted in Hong Kong, where living spaces are even more limited than in Japan, and the following year, a renovation case study based on the aforementioned research was exhibited (8). MUJI's observational methods became known through the media, and the company responded to the Hong Kong case study by developing customer services that proposed simple living around the world.

In 2020, organized by Hara, MUJI released an advertisement that showed various scenes of cleaning around the world (9) (Fig.6). This is an extension of the drive for simplicity. A series of images captures not the states of simplicity, but the acts required to achieve simplicity, portrayed by the copy that reads 'Pleasant, somehow'. Cleaning is explained as an activity to find 'moderate comfort' by working on nature, which tends to be chaotic. Therefore, Hara's idea of cleaning goes beyond the functionalist concept of eliminating the useless. In MUJI's photo book *Cleaning*, the act of cleaning is further divided into several daily actions: sweeping, washing, wiping, polishing, erasing, removing, and so forth (10). This classification based on action words is in line with the company's stance of conceptualizing simplicity from customers' perspective (11).

Figure 6: MUJI Osaka Shop and Campaign Poster ‘Pleasant, somehow’, 2021
Source: Author

Kenya Hara’s Aesthetics

Kenya Hara has written numerous essays through which his design philosophy can be divined. The word ‘white’ is central to Hara’s aesthetic as his idea of white encompasses a range from moderate simplicity to an absence of things and is a characteristic that can be found not only in physical phenomena, but also in human actions. In his 2008 book *Shiro* (*White*) (Fig.7), Hara prefaced his essay as follows:

> It’s not that there is white. Rather, there is a sensitivity to perceive white. Therefore, we should not search for white. By exploring our sensitivity of white, we can become aware of a white that is a little whiter than the ordinary white (12).

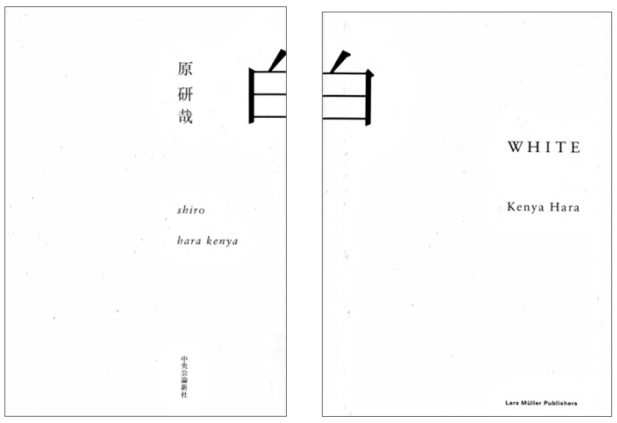

Figure 7: Kenya Hara, *White*, 2008.
(left) Japanese version, (right) English version

Figure 8: Kenya Hara, 100 *Whites*, 2018.
(left) Japanese version, (right) English version

Hara is more of an essayist than a theorist. Before defining white, he tried to find the qualities that led to white in everything. Hara often tries to find the source of white in traditional Japanese culture. As he states, his essay on white is a counterpart to Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* (1939), a famous essay that explains Japanese beauty in terms of the culture's unique sensitivity to darkness.

What Hara actually means by white is not obvious; rather, the word white inspires Hara to discover the beauty of any object. For example, in a collection of essays titled *Shiro Hyaku* (*100 Whites*) (13) (Fig.8), Hara finds minimalist beauty through keywords such as *shirayu* (literally 'white hot water'), meaning hot water with nothing added, and *shiraki* (literally 'white wood') denoting unpainted wood. The aesthetic value is sought in the absence of any additionality.

What Hara considers essential to white is its 'emptiness' (14). Although simplicity in modern design is often supposed to be a state optimized for a specific purpose, the emptiness that Hara advocates is a kind of blank space that allows the insertion of any kind of interests, expectations, and requirements (15). Therefore, Hara also uses the word 'emptiness' to explain the concept of MUJI (16). The company should not have a certain brand image but must accept all kinds of images like an empty vessel that accepts all kinds of contents. For some people, MUJI can seem ecological, whereas, for others, it might represent urban sophistication, and so forth, and that is what a 'no brand' company aims for, versatility.

Hara discusses cleaning in relation to white. Whether it is a garden, a house, or a city, it will eventually decay and finally return to nature if left untended and uncared for. For Hara, cleaning is a human activity that copes with nature's inherent chaos. He states that cleaning is 'a struggle between nature and mankind' and 'a struggle between chaos and order' (17). Thus, Hara's idea of cleaning exemplifies a modest human attitude toward nature, one which differs from the modernist ambition to control nature, and from functionalism that tries to wipe out everything unnecessary. As mentioned previously, Hara's understanding of cleaning is visualized in his 2020 MUJI advertising project, *Cleaning*, which collated global scenes of cleaning.

Minimalism from Japan to the West

From the second half of the nineteenth century, the West encountered Japanese aesthetics and discovered a fascination with its minimalist facets that continues to this day. Protagonists, who are both pioneers in the adaptation of Japanese aesthetics and innovators of Western art and design concepts, received significant attention.

John Cage first heard 'Zen and Dada' in Nancy Wilson Ross's 1938 lecture (18). Although Dadaism has few aesthetic parallels to minimalism at its core, Tristan Tzara, one of the protagonists of the Dada scene, refers to genuinely Buddhist characteristics, 'Tzara's Dada manifesto declared that everything was equal to nothing, and nothing was essentially good, engaging, and essential' (19). D. T. Suzuki gave his legendary lectures on Buddhism at Columbia University in 1952–1953, attended by many of New York's intellectuals, such as John Cage, the musician Morton Feldman, the painters Philip Guston and Ad Reinhardt, the gallerist Betty Parsons, and the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm. The painter Mark Tobey, a friend of Cage, encountered Buddhism as early as the 1920s (20). Allan Kaprow, the inventor of the happening movement, and George Brecht, who was central to the American Fluxus movement, also met Cage in the 1950s. There are distinct resonances between Jackson Pollock's painting technique and Brecht's seemingly randomly inspired performances. The unplanned, emphasis on the 'now' and volatility of single actions resonate with the teachings of Buddhism (21). The connection between postmodern art and Zen Buddhism became more and more virulent at the end of the 1950s. In 1959, the conference 'Zen Buddhism in American Culture' was held at Sarah Lawrence College. Examples of minimalist works at this period are Cage's piano piece, *4'33"*, consisting of piano

music made exclusively from the noises present at the venue of its performance, and Ad Reinhardt's black paintings, which, only on closer scrutiny, reveal different colors.

In the further course of the 60s, 70s, and 80s, minimalist tendencies were consolidated in minimalist music (e.g., Steve Reich and Terry Riley), the visual arts (e.g., Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, Yves Klein, and James Lee Byars), and design (e.g., Dieter Rams's minimalist product design and John Maeda's widely acclaimed book, *The Laws of Simplicity* (2006)) (22).

The trend toward minimalism in the West has become a contemporary lifestyle trope characterized by voluntary restriction and a rejection of consumerism, commitment to natural and minimalist interior design (Japandi), and the increasing importance of mindfulness (e.g., Yoga and Ikigai).

MUJI in the West

Since 2005, MUJI has been expanding into Europe by establishing branches and products embodying a minimalist aesthetic. Currently, over 1000 global MUJI outlets offer their products in 31 countries, providing the West with a catalyst for the minimalist aesthetics of Japanese origin.

From a European perspective, where lifestyle brands such as Ikea or Habitat have been popular and successful for decades, MUJI describes a more differentiated narrative because it appears to be closely linked to its original culture. The brand's origin is evident simply by its use of Japanese characters for the logo and product labels. There are also exotic motifs (a Buddha on the European homepage, accessed 05/08/2021) and a matching visual language. The judgments and prejudices of European provenance against Japanese foreigners become immediately visible and readable for Europeans. Mixing of typical Japanese characteristics of seemingly opposites stems from a long tradition (see above), seems to be an essential part of the brand's success. While brands such as Ikea and Habitat may have been influenced by the cultural background of their origins (Sweden and the UK), Japanese roots strongly form MUJI's brand essence and inform both its formal and aesthetic appearance.

MUJI thus forms an aesthetic basis that transforms one's living environment with all its everyday necessities, moods, and private communications into an intertextual narrative wherein the current trend toward Japanese aesthetics has a profound resonance. Due to the adaptations of Japanese aesthetics by artistic elites, there seems to be a comprehensible introduction of a necessary exotic alternative to the fast pace and overabundance of Western living standards.

Conclusion

Since the 2000s, MUJI has been communicating with an advertising aesthetic characterized by the extreme reduction of formal design elements and an essential reference to Japanese values of simplicity and cleanliness (see MUJI's Minimalist Strategy). MUJI differentiates itself from its European competitors at the international business level with this minimalistic aesthetic, informed by a distinctly Japanese mentality. In the case of European competitors, references to cultural identities and origins seldom play a pivotal role (see Chapter 5). It makes sense then, to classify and evaluate the aesthetics of the advertising worlds of MUJI in the long history of the mutual influence of Japanese and European cultural values.

For 150 years, the encounter between European and Japanese culture has opened up complex facets related to both foreignness and a fascination with different cultures. From the nineteenth century trend of Japanese woodblock prints—known in the West as Japonism—to the current pop cultural phenomena, Japanese aesthetics in the West are considered to epitomize the alien and the other. The analysis of minimalism and withdrawal as the primary aesthetic substance of the Japanese tradition falls on fertile ground in the West.

The economic–technical progress and nature oriented, traditional renunciation stand in a reciprocal dynamic vis-à-vis each other. The self-image of the cultures works on the mutual consideration and difference between the self and the other.

This relation only arises through differences and can be defined in, and through it, and thus, forms a cultural reference system characterized by its dynamism. However, there are certain limits. Naturally, stereotypes and clichés arise about what is viewed as strange, formulated with the help of the already known and viewed through an exoticizing lens.

This view, and its related aesthetic formulations and adaptations, is again exposed to the judgment of the other side. Thus, a chain of mutual reflections is set in motion, whereby minimalism is a notable bearer of the formal and substantive distinctions between the East and the West (see Chapter 4).

The adaptation of Japanese aesthetics in the West repeatedly led to significant cultural achievements, such as impressionism, functionalism, or postmodern minimalism. Japanese aesthetics also found its way into philosophical and theoretical discourses. Different questions are derived from this, first, dealing with the extreme peculiarities of Japanese aesthetics; second, with the West's resulting interest in them; and third, with the current developments in adapting aesthetics based on the lifestyle brand MUJI.

Many comparative studies provide information about the compatibility of otherness in one's own life by attributing to Japanese culture a pronounced sensitivity in dealing with the foreign. If one assumes an unequal conditionality of the spiritual and tangible and their mutual relationship within European intellectual history, then it seems to be more about the edge or the in-between in the East. The basic tendency for dichotomous thinking in the West manifests itself through the distinction between the creator and the creature, which is absent in Asian thinking.

> The Asian decision to understand man as a part of the cosmos and not as a creature, created image and copy of a creator god, marks the widest and most insurmountable gap between the Occidental–Old European and Asian worldview (23).

The unity of the opposites identified in the West and the values associated to them seem to play a subordinate role in Japan. This is exemplified by the adaptation of the Chinese writing system, which was utterly foreign in the sixth century (and the writing system of the West in the nineteenth century) and the Buddhist culture; the opposing forms of expression of the feudal warlords' pomp with the simultaneously established discreet withdrawal of the tea ceremony in the sixteenth century; and the current tendencies of the overabundance of material and media trends.

If one does not think about opposites here, it may become evident that fullness and emptiness are mutually dependent and form a unity. Over the centuries, the Japanese have developed a way of dealing with the unfamiliar that the West was willing to adapt as they were particularly fascinated by Japan's extreme minimalistic restraint and renunciation of excessive detail.

Kenya Hara's measured and granular use of the term 'white' leads the tradition of Japanese terms and their specific use—for example, the term 'shadow' in Tanizaki—into the design of everyday things. Therefore, this linguistic foundation opens up a fascinating world as a place of longing for the Western lifestyle. MUJI's brand staging is based on the spirit of minimalism and is perceived through its different cultural views. Simplicity is not always, per se, the same. It depends crucially on cultural roots and derivations.

Hara's concept of 'cleaning' as a counterpoint to the chaos in nature exemplifies an image of nature that opposes the Western functionalist efforts that seek to dominate nature. The West's fascination with minimalism goes hand in hand with its longing to discover a previous alternative view of the world and things and is the reason for MUJI's success in its brand staging.

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Nicole Christ is a Berlin based communication designer and design researcher. Since 2008, she has worked as a self-employed designer predominantly in the areas of culture, fashion, and lifestyle. In 2018, she graduated with a Master's degree from the program 'Leadership in Digital Communication' at the Berlin University of the Arts. Since 2017, she has been researching the visual culture of the digital media using emojis. So far, she has been a public speaker at conferences such as re:publica, the Digital Bauhaus Summit, and Age of Artists. She teaches design strategies at the Cologne campus of the Macromedia University.

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