



Beauty in Murasaki Shikibu (ca. 973–ca. 1020)

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Murasaki's novel reflects a philosophy of aesthetics imbued with the beauty of Nature, mirroring the phenomenological sensibilities of indigenous Shintō as well as Buddhism. High priority was given to both the creation and appreciation of the arts on a daily basis, from the musical performance, landscape gardening, and painting, to the layering of kimono colors and proper selection of the flower used to adorn a love poem. It is a culture that celebrates viewing the moon in autumn, falling snow in winter, and spring blossoms. However, this aesthetic immersion also could become hopelessly mired in pretentious appearances, resembling the exaggerated embellishments of a hothouse flower when manipulated by calculating intellect. Women are burdened by the heaviest demands for aesthetic perfection, and are forced to compete with one another to garner the highest kudos for the performance art of their lives. Nonetheless, the novel reveals genuine responses to the beauties of Nature. Murasaki's thoughts of her impending death are intertwined with aesthetic appreciation for the phenomenal world:

As the first touches of dawn came over the sky the scene was as if made especially for her who so loved the spring. [...] One would have thought that the possibilities of beauty were here exhausted. [...] Looking out upon all this joy and beauty, Murasaki thought how little time she had left.

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