

I n t r o d u c t i o n

Before ever taking Professor Inouye's Japanese visual culture course, I knew there was something special about Japanese cuisine. It seems impossible to consume the meal before you without first taking a moment to indulge in such an attractive display of food. What is merely food to many cultures becomes an art form to the Japanese. Despite my visual indulgence in the artwork set before me, framed by the equally aesthetic platters that hold them, I had never fully understood the emphasis on its appearance.

One of the Japanese dishes that always intrigued me is the boxed lunch, called *bentō*. Not having had the benefit of studying Japanese visual culture, the way in which the *bentō* initially appealed to me could be described as quirky at best. As someone who cannot stand having different foods mix together on his plate, the concept of having each food separated in its own neat compartment made me inexplicably content. Yet I knew there was more to the *bentō* than a functional means to separate food. As I studied Japanese visual culture, I began to see some strong connections between animism (the indigenous religion of Japan), its view of space, and the *makunouchi bentō*. The following presentation offers some brief background history of the *makunouchi bentō* and some thoughts on its use of animistic space.



bentō

Japanese Boxed Lunch

a portable meal

used in situations where food is not readily accessible



The Japanese boxed lunch is first and foremost a portable meal. It is used where the cooking of food is not readily available. Its beginnings may have coincided with the increasing use of *onigiri*, or "rice balls" (packed rice wrapped with seaweed) in the Muromachi period (1333-1573). Boxes were used for the carrying of many *onigiri*—a portable container for the ultimate portable food. The convenience of the *bentō* led to its use by merchants, actors, warriors, and other people of travel. It was used for outdoor events and social gatherings. Today, the convenience of the *bentō* still serves the Japanese people well. From train stations to department stores to school lunches made at home, the *bentō* goes wherever there are people to be fed.

Origins of the aesthetic bentō



makunouchi bentō

Convenience, however, is only one aspect of the *bentō*. If one were to ask where the aesthetics of Japanese cuisine meets *bentō*, the answer would be the *makunouchi bentō*. *Makunouchi* can be translated as "curtain interval." It originated in the theaters of the Edo period (1600-1868) as a meal served between acts for actors and during shows for patrons. Patrons would create elaborate *bentō* for their favorite actors, competing with other patrons' designs and thus contributing to the aesthetic value of *bentō*.

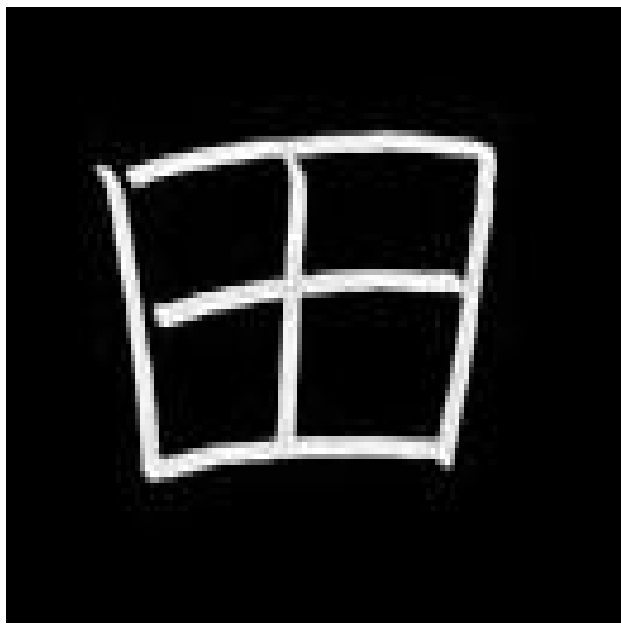
kaiseki bentō

the tea ceremony bentō



The aesthetics of the *makunouchi bentō* were further developed as they were integrated into the Japanese tea ceremony (*chanoyu*). *Kaiseki makunouchi bentō* were used for outdoor tea ceremonies; however, they also became a less formal alternative to *kaiseki ryōri* meals, which were very light meals made in the spirit of the fasting associated with traditional tea ceremonies. The *kaiseki makunouchi bentō* would inherit some important characteristics from the tea ceremony that would enhance its aesthetics. Firstly, the appearance of the *bentō* would appropriately match the elegance of the tea ceremony itself. Furthermore, creating *bentō* became part of the Buddhist virtue of ritual practice. The tea ceremony itself demanded a great deal of practice for its precise movements and methods. Such practice elevated *kaiseki makunouchi bentō* to an elaborate art form that sought aesthetic perfection.





shokado makunouchi
bentō

The most prominent and popular *bentō*, the *shokado bentō* is a perfect square divided into four, equal quadrants. This form of the *bentō* was created by a Zen priest of the same name in the early 17th century. The shape of the box is directly derived from the Japanese *kanji* for *ta*, which means "rice paddy." With the rice paddy as the lifeline of Japan, the *shokado bentō* becomes a familiar presentation of Japan itself. The design of the *shokado* allows for aesthetics that are both simple yet varied.



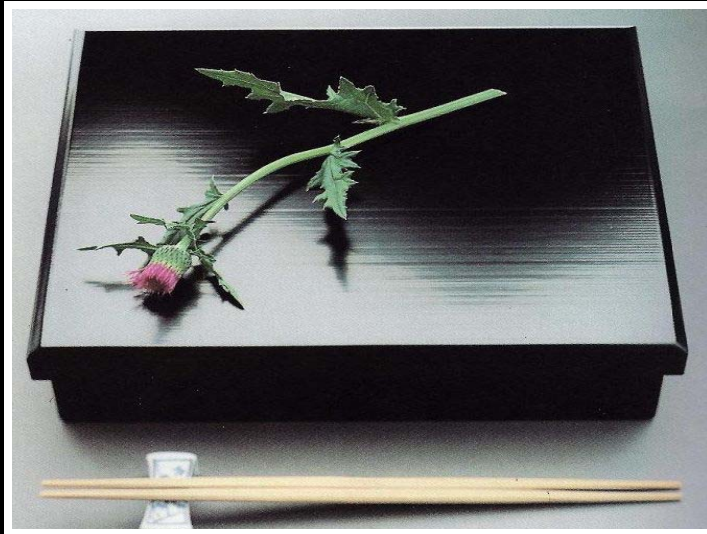
makunouchi bentō
as visible **space**

- container: entering significant space
- mundane food (from *soto*) becomes beautiful
- ingredients as non-symbolic signs of Japan's natural world
- compartments: detached, multiple perspectives of space and its contents
- Japan: a single vessel of smaller islands

Animism, the belief that all objects in the environment have a spirit, is the primary characteristic of the Shintō religion that defines its view of space. Contrary to traditional Western Judeo-Christian's separation of God (heaven) from man (Earth), Shintō's animism places man amongst the gods, or *kami*. Objects that may be considered mundane and insignificant with the Judeo-Christian view of space—rocks, trees, rivers, animals of all shapes and sizes—can be sacred in the Shintō world. Such sacred objects are not symbols; they are not crucifixes or steeples that point to an invisible deity. Rather, they are simply as they appear—immediate presentations of *kami*, existing in the tangible world shared with man.



■ container – entering space



To indicate to the worshipper that he or she is entering sacred space, the Shintō shrine utilizes the *torii* gate. The *torii* signifies that the worshipper is moving from the outside (*soto*) to the inside (*uchi*), where the space and all that is contained within it is sacred and significant. In much the same way, the *makunouchi bentō* serves as a container for the *uchi*. As the *bentō* is set before you and the cover is removed, the diner enters a very significant space. Mundane food from *soto* becomes beautiful within this space.

Animism's emphasis on the immediate world led to the Japanese people's great respect towards nature. Creators of *makunouchi bentō* make a clear effort to include foods from various aspects of nature for each compartment. Food from the sea, food from the mountains, rice—the *makunouchi bentō* is a non-symbolic compilation of Japan's natural and beautiful world. *Bentō* makers also employ seasonal themes for their work. The *shokado bentō* serves this purpose particularly well with its four equal compartments representing Japan's four seasons.



■ compartments – perspective of space



If all objects in the world have spirits and thus can be sacred, then there is no universal truth in Shintō space. In other words, there is no single perspective that captures the world and the *kami* inhabiting it. Each point of view offers a unique and intimate vantage point. The tea house gardens of Japan, such as the Katsura shrine (shown top left), are designed so that no vantage point allows one to see the garden in its entirety. Unlike Western modernity, the various segments of animistic space are equal in importance—the Sumiyoshi Pine prevents a single, dominating vantage point that shows the "big picture." *Byōbu* (painted screens often depicting daily life) such as the *Notable Sights in Kyoto* (shown bottom left) limit one's perspective to smaller, equally important segments of space.

The compartments within the *bentō* serve a similar purpose. The space is divided so that each food can be presented separately, as both significant and unique parts of a larger, unapparent whole. Western cuisine arranges food together on an open plate; such a singular display allows for a quick evaluation of the meal by the diner. However, the *bentō* forces the diner to indulge in each portion of the meal, the aesthetics of each compartment not infringing upon the others. Each portion of food is equally significant, and the *shokado bentō* demonstrates this perfectly with its symmetrical design.



Conclusion

It is fascinating to see a dish as distinctly Japanese as the *makunouchi bentō* manifesting characteristics of animism, Japan's indigenous religion. The relationship between the two is a strong testament to the significance of visual culture in the daily life of Japan. Kenji Ekuan, author of *The Aesthetics of the Japanese Lunchbox*, succinctly reminds us of such significance. As he gazes into the *makunouchi bentō*, he cannot help but feel "an image of the Japanese archipelago rise to the surface."

