

## International Congress of Aesthetics 2007 “Aesthetics Bridging Cultures”

### Taking a Fancy to Orange: An Aesthetic Invitation

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Most people in various cultures throughout the world customarily perceive and understand intrinsic truths by using their bodies, their hearts, their spirit, and, also, their minds. Ideas, thoughts and sensory awareness merge, overlap, tumble about and finally embrace. Fundamental notions within each individual are not necessarily beholden to arbitrary categories yet these categories are frequently imposed on our sensibilities. Objectivity is only a construct. This is particularly true when exploring the notion of color.

In a recent essay on Islamic aesthetics, Jale Erzen discusses why it is crucial to understand that the concept of permanence implies continuous change and that human insight oftentimes cannot and perhaps should not, be articulated in explanatory words. There is no fixed point of view in Islamic aesthetics; time and place are not stable. Erzen suggests that the Islamic worldview as it manifests itself in aesthetic achievement is a profound one, consisting of three principles. They are “... (1) the principle of constant change within permanence, (2) the principle of the uncertainty of human cognition, and (3) the principle of love, or understanding with the heart.”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in the Sufi tradition, all five senses (even perhaps a sixth) need to be touched in order to arrive at unmediated perception.

Each culture has its unique aesthetic pathways, but in non-western cultures there appear to be remarkable similarities. Erzen uses the example of a spiral which is never linear and whose boundaries are never sharp. Orange is a color that exhibits these qualities with depth and subtlety. Some might say that all colors exhibit comparable characteristics, but this would not be entirely accurate, particularly pigment colors. Primary colors, that is, red, blue or yellow cannot be mixed with other colors to produce themselves, but they can be blended to produce varying shades of violet, green and orange. Within the color orange, the red and yellow edges blur and change. Orange exhibits what a friend of mine decided to call her book on aesthetics: *Soft Boundaries*.<sup>2</sup>

Nature seems touched, even titillated, by the color orange. Everywhere we look we see a myriad of orange hues: fruits and vegetables, flowers and leaves, birds, insects, fish and other underwater phenomena, spices, the robes of Thai and Tibetan Buddhist monks, as well as the garb of American prisoners. Artists and designers love the myriad shades of orange. For example, the American glass artist, Chihuly, frequently creates glowing

orange pieces that seem to vibrate in the natural environment. The Finnish design firm, Marimekko, consistently uses shades of orange perhaps to enhance the chilly dark and warm light of Finland. Some Protestants in Northern Ireland and many Ukrainians use orange to make a political statement. There, there is the sun setting and the moon rising. Perhaps the most visually dramatic and visually complex are the orange colors in fire.

I wish to explore the sensory, sensuous and aesthetic aspects of orange by employing the pathways Erzen suggests in her essay on Islamic aesthetics since, in my judgment, they exist in various guises throughout the world. I will begin in Turkey and Cyprus with tulips and apricots, then leapfrog to Japan to discuss persimmons and torii and, finally, leapfrog again, this time to New York City to touch upon the Christo and Jean Claude "The Gates" Project, a temporary site installation installed throughout Central Park in February, 2005.

I begin with tulips which many scholars suggest were born and nurtured in Turkey and Cyprus and, most likely, parts of neighboring Persia, Turkmenistan and further east. Tulips were cultivated in the garden of Sultan Mehmed II around the middle of the Fifteenth Century and later under the reign of Süleyman the Magnificent where they became associated with the Ottoman culture. Their colors vary but the varieties that ranged from orangey-red to orangey-yellow dotted the landscape. Eventually, the tulip became a religious symbol largely because of its name, *lale*. In Turkish and other Arabic languages Allah and *lale* are written the same way. But what is most interesting, at least to me, is how the tulip engendered excitement and passion (and greed) among Western Europeans. It was a love affair that lasted for centuries. Wild tulips were transported, initially from Anatolia to what was then Constantinople. Eventually, virtually all royal families had their own tulip beds. Royalty in Constantinople, Bavaria, Vienna, Salzburg, Paris, Amsterdam and elsewhere in Europe competed with each other over the most exotic ones. Tulip bulbs quickly became outrageously expensive and therefore precious. They were sought after, desired, loved, painted and ultimately cultivated. Tulip-mania, a word used by Anna Pavord and others, continued to the mid-Seventeenth Century and well beyond in terms of cultivating hybrids. Now, in the Twenty-first Century we tend to take tulips for granted although flower lovers find it difficult to overlook their changing beauty from youth to old age. Young tulips seem almost too slim, their petals tightly shut, inaccessible, their color pale. As they age their color becomes richer. They seem to abandon all reserve as the petals open wide to reveal their innermost heart. It is their transformation over time that beguiles us.

The tulip motif appeared everywhere in Turkey: Iznik ceramics, embroidery, miniature paintings, illuminations, even as architectural decorations on the exterior and interior of palaces. Striped, fringed, multicolored, wide petaled, thin petaled, double petaled, feathered, dagger-petaled – on and on the descriptions go; yet there remains much speculation about how these tulips were cultivated. Anna Pavord notes that the Istanbul Tulip, that is, the dagger petaled tulip, may have evolved from a gift of ten varieties brought to Istanbul in 1651 by the Austrian Ambassador Schmid von Schwarzenhorn. The long-petaled "Kefe Tulip," she notes, also must have been involved. Pavord calls the multi-tiered interbreeding a "great melting pot."<sup>3</sup>

Today, tulips continue to be loved in Turkey. In the spring of 2006, three million tulips bulbs were planted in Istanbul. They bloomed just in time to celebrate the International

Tulip Symposium. An art exhibit with tulips as the motif was held in the old mint near the Topkapi Museum, where coins were originally stamped. Tulips flooded the city; everywhere I looked I saw a sea of tulips, mostly yellow, red, orange and all shades between. Perhaps it was simply a huge touristic marketing endeavor. Still, they fooled me into thinking that city officials had created a temporary environmental art installation, and I hope this was the intent. In any case, it was clearly an aesthetic invitation. No matter which city boulevard I chose, tulips greeted me along the way.

The delicate, yet luscious, Turkish apricot seems to reflect its refined color in its taste. Small and elegant, they invite us to admire, smell, and swiftly bite into their tender flesh. Fruit often outshines what the blossoms on the tree have promised. However, in this case, the early spring milky white flowers patterned with a touch of dusky pink give way to heart shaped soft green leaves and, soon after, in early and midsummer, apricots begin to grow and ripen. They are eaten fresh from the tree. Their mature ripeness is short lived and, thus, many are dried naturally turning coppery orange and eventually brownish orange, similar in color to rust. During times of war and when food was temporarily scarce, apricots provided a year-round nutritious, low caloric and delicious addition to meals.

Apricots are related to plums, but ripen much earlier. In Arabic they are called *al-birgug*, which dates back to the Latin *praecoquere*, to ripen early. An interesting aside is that the word for apricot in Argentina and Chile is "damasco," most likely referring to Damascus in Syria which was once part of the Ottoman Empire. Turkish people have a saying that suggests that the only thing better than experiencing the moment are apricots from Damascus. It doesn't get better than this.

In Europe and elsewhere apricots were believed to be an aphrodisiac. In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*, Titania, the queen of the fairies suggests a seductive appetizer:

Feed him with apricocks and dewberries,  
With purple grapes, green figs, and mulberries.<sup>4</sup>

Even if it was only a dream, or possibly not, what a beautiful combination of colors, textures and tastes. Yet, in some ways Turkish people take the beauty, taste, and pale orange color of their marvelous apricots for granted just as Japanese take their beautiful deep orangey persimmons for granted.

It would be easy to compare the Turkish apricot with the Japanese plum (*ume* ) but the comparison would be superficial at best. Plum blossoms are spectacular, appearing in paintings, woodcuts and pottery, but the plums are very small and usually pickled and placed in rice balls. Many times an artificial orange color is added much like the color enhanced Maraschino cherries used for alcoholic drinks in Europe and the U. S. Old women are sometimes called pickled plums (*umeboshi*) an unflattering reference to their wrinkles, just as we in English occasionally refer to old women as prunes.

Japanese persimmons (*kaki* ), on the other hand, need no artificial color. They are a rich, deep orange with red undertones. Some are darker, others paler and their shapes vary according to their type. Their various orange colors influenced Japanese tradition and history. For example, persimmon colored lacquered miso soup bowls are still sold in

Japanese department stores. Traditional kimono and *obi* (wide sashes worn by women) often include orange, particularly during the fall season. During the Taisho period (1912-26), the color orange became the rage. Brightly colored new patterns seemed to emulate the energy of the "roaring twenties" when American flappers dressed in orange named "the tango."<sup>5</sup>

Somehow all this energy, delight and appreciation began to disappear. Persimmon trees continue to grow throughout Honshu, the main island of Japan, including public and private gardens. During World War II, and its aftermath, when food was scarce, persimmons were a staple, largely because of their vitamin C content, and because they were easily obtainable. Many Japanese told me that as children they loved climbing the wild, gnarled trees, and those planted in their gardens. The fresh persimmons they ate sometimes gave them stomachaches since they had not yet learned which were sweet or sour. Older Japanese who survived the war remember many tales concerning persimmons and the various ways to consume them including a special persimmon liquor. They are the acknowledged experts about color, shape, size and various drying procedures.

Ogawa Shinsuke, a filmmaker who died in 1992, left behind extensive footage on the slow demise of persimmon production. The film, Red Persimmon, was completed by his Chinese assistant Peng Xiaolian in 2001.<sup>6</sup> It documents a vanishing way of life of persimmon farmers around Mount Iao. Visually, the film is brimming with orange color; persimmons are literally vibrating in their landscape; in part perhaps because by the time persimmons are fully ripe, their leaves are gone. They are filmed in every kind of light and in all weather conditions. Their fresh skin seems to radiate strength and vigor, as do the local men and women who, while picking, peeling and stringing them for drying under the eaves, admire among themselves their beauty and elegance.

Ogawa and, later, Peng effortlessly show the interconnectedness between the persimmons and the farmers who love them. Each man and woman seems to exhibit intense pride, pleasure and comfort in their work, their environment and in each other. Yet there is an undercurrent of sadness which both filmmakers try to minimize. The survival of the community and the fruit is the film's heart and soul. The farmers are no longer young and they are not lacking in wisdom and wit. Their favorite persimmon story concerns a small group of American soldiers who finally reached their little village a few months after the close of WW II. Entranced by the brightly colored fruit, one soldier climbed a tree on which hung the astringent variety. After one bite he immediately spat it out. Apparently the soldiers left behind large cans of bright red ketchup (perhaps to drown out the sour taste of the persimmons?). The villagers opened a can, tasted it and immediately fed it to their pigs.

Persimmons are generally harvested in November. A few are deliberately left behind as an offering to the birds. Tiny ones are left on the ground for the same reason. Most of them are dried to be ready for the New Year celebrations since they symbolize good health and success in life. The local villagers generally attach them to long white strings which are then hung on rafters of farmhouses or specially constructed structures that always face south to absorb the sun. A good west wind, say the villagers, helps the persimmon dry faster and a snowstorm helps to increase their sweetness. Once dried these persimmons, known as *benigaki*, are sold throughout Japan in beautifully wrapped

paper containers. Fresh ones appear in food markets throughout Japan and some are exported to Hawaii.

A short story by Atoda Takashi, "The Square Persimmon," ostensibly explores a Japanese salaryman's visits to a local Buddhist priest to discuss burial plans for the parents of an executive in his company. Actually, it is an elegant essay on the aesthetics of persimmon tea cakes, their color, their texture, and their soft feel in his hand which reminded him of a woman he had met as a child who wore a persimmon colored *obi* (sash). "Her *obi*," he writes, "the color of a ripe persimmon, cast a showy luster, like the light of an autumn evening."<sup>7</sup> Throughout this brief story, Atoda constantly refers to the fruit's exquisite beauty. He remembers the old, small teacake shop "... inside the glass case was a dazzling gallery of art."<sup>8</sup> The color of persimmons and the beautiful persimmon teacakes remained with him. They were invitations he couldn't refuse.

Japanese torii (Shinto gateways) are yet another kind of invitation. Many are persimmon colored appearing on city streets and just about everywhere else in Japan. Their color acts as a beacon. We know exactly where we are when we see one. They are, as I have suggested in detail elsewhere, a form of public art.<sup>9</sup> Although many were destroyed during World War II, even more have been constructed since then, creating a landscape (or occasional waterscape) where humans and *kami* (Japanese deities) visit together or separately. Their orangey-red color creates a strong visual contrast to trees, to farmland, to grey urban concrete structures and to black macadam roadways. Torii also are largely taken for granted although paradoxically they continue to suggest to Japanese, and certainly to me, that we respond to their invitation, and we do.

The notion of the invitation and the variety of pathways they create may have inspired Christo and Jeanne Claude who created the umbrella project in Japan and California and, most recently, in February 2005, "The Gates" Project in New York City's Central Park. This monumental public art project consisted of 7,500 saffron colored gates constructed along 26 miles of pathways within Central Park. The month of February turned out to be the perfect foil for their orange color since the landscape was winterized, that is, Central Park consisted of pale, neutral colors, namely tans and greys with hints of evergreen here and there. Once completed, the gates seemed to take on a life of their own, marching across the landscape delineating the Park's existing pathways. Some were wide, some quite narrow, depending on the width of the paths. Their height however remained constant – 15 feet or about 4.5 meters – enhancing the snake-like qualities of their meandering parade.

Christo and Jeanne Claude spent time in Ibaraki, and elsewhere in Japan before and during their umbrella project in 1991, so my speculation that the Gates resemble *torii* is not that farfetched. They must have seen thousands of persimmon colored *torii* everywhere they went, including on the private land chosen for the umbrella project. I'm sure they ate in restaurants with welcoming *noren*, which are two short pieces of fabric hanging from the top of the doorframe, swaying in the breeze indicating that the restaurant is open. These images may have indirectly influenced their concept, even though Christo's initial gate drawings date back to 1979.

The Gates Project was a combination of dance, symphony and art happening. It was an event in orange and an orange event. Each day tens of thousands of people experienced

the Central Park environment welcomed by Christo's and Jeanne Claude's Gates. People walked, skipped, did cartwheels (yes!), jumped to touch the fabric, photographed each other, talked and laughed with strangers from New York and from all over the world. Dog walkers permitted total strangers to pet their animals, children in strollers lifted their arms and laughed at the wind touching the orange fabric. Lovers, old and young, strolled hand-in-hand. Some had their wedding photos taken surrounded by bright orange gates. Just as Christo and Jeanne Claude predicted, the ever-changing audience made their way through the gates, participating in the orangey art environment. Many wore orange to celebrate the joyous occasion.

Each day as I walked around the park, what struck me is how Christo's drawings and collages, even those completed more than 25 years ago, resembled the actual experience of walking through the gates in the Central Park environment. His conceptual and design drawings and collages are brilliant. The orange/saffron colors reminded me of the robes worn by Thai and Tibetan monks and indeed, looking down at the park from the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, it appeared that the gates were adorned by saffron robes. Their color changed from moment to moment. Sometimes they looked almost golden, other times like persimmons or tulips, especially in the early evening light. When it rained, their orange color reflected on the wet paths and in the small ponds. The reflections on the ground sometimes appeared to be in flames: golden, saffron, rust, all moving and changing with the wind. Frequently the bare tree branches formed shadows on the orange fabric. One evening it snowed, and the orange gates literally glowed in the dark. The fluidity of movement and change over time is one of the many remarkable aspects of this project.

One could easily use food to describe both the subtle and dramatic changes that occur each millisecond: carrots, apricots, oranges, tangerines, butternut squash, red and orange peppers, peaches, pumpkins, Finnish cloudberry, Swedish rutabagas, not yet ripe tomatoes, and, finally, persimmons. So exactly what color are they? The longer I observed them the more orange colors I discovered. Professionally trained artists are taught to see colors in context, since our eyes send differing messages to our brain. Impressionist painters understood this concept. By juxtaposing the colors of their paint strokes, for example, yellow and red, they "tricked us" into seeing orange. Then they added other colors to create a luminous effect. Many of Christo's drawings use this technique. By using many different shades of colored pencils, he convinces viewers that the Gates are indeed, saffron or paprika colored, or perhaps apricot, or even orange. We joke that, in English, nothing rhymes with orange which perhaps is why we use food and other things to describe it.

My fancy with the color orange continues. Some will accuse me of arbitrarily leapfrogging. I suggest that throughout the world related aesthetic pathways exist that invite us to explore them. In the Twenty-first Century we can literally travel to each one in person or virtually. Those I chose not only form a unique bond, but they also come closest to the three principles outlined by Erzen. Moreover, in my judgment, tulips, apricots, persimmons, torii and finally Christo's and Jeanne Claude's Gates, display an elegant, seductive choreography of movement through time and place. One way or another, we must all surrender to time (and place). What better way than to dance through tulips, *torii*, and the Gates while dallying under apricot and persimmon trees – all at once.

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<sup>1</sup> Jale Nejdert Erzen, "Islamic Aesthetics: An Alternative Way to Knowledge," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 65, No. 1, Winter 2007, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> Clare Detels, *Soft Boundaries: Re-Visioning the Arts and Aesthetics in American Education*, 1999, Bergin & Garvey, Westport, CT, London.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Pavord, *The Tulip*, 1999, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London, p. 41-42.

<sup>4</sup> G. B. Harrison, *Shakespeare, The Complete Works*, 1948, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York, p. 527, vs. 169-170.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell Owens, "Room to Improve," *New York Times*, Thursday, 13 July 06, p. D2, YT.

<sup>6</sup> *Red Persimmons*, Directed by Ogawa Shinsuke and Peng Xiaolian. Producers: Sugano Kenkichi, Shiraishi Yoko, Yasui Yoshio. 2001, in Japanese with English subtitles.

<sup>7</sup> Atoda Takashi, *The Square Persimmon and Other Stories*, 1991, Charles E. Tuttle, Co. Inc. Tokyo, p. 199.

<sup>8</sup> Atoda, p. 193.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Sandrisser, "The Seductive Torii," *Aesthetics: Looking at Japanese Culture*, March 2004, No. 11 (Special Issue), edited and published by the Japanese Society for Aesthetics, The University of Tokyo, p. 172-184, and in Japanese translated by Sugimura Sokichi, *Landscape Design*, No. 24, Summer 2001, p. 108-113, *Landscape Design*, No 25, Summer 2001, p. 134-139, and *Landscape Design*, No. 27, Spring 2002, p. 118-123.