

## **Otherness**

Otherness is the condition of deriving much of your nature from its difference from others. Otherness, in that sense, would mark out the work of an exceptionally gifted poet, who simply finds his way to language formulations-- 'the road was a ribbon of moonlight'--- fresh to others, stimulating to many. Experts in all the arts would display this ability to surprise through otherness.

To be worthy of its status as a concept, otherness must reflect a significantly surprising optic, or way of looking at things. James Whistler, the British painter, was said to have invented the London fog, bringing it through his canvasses into the full consciousness of Londoners. Sometimes history furnishes its own otherness examples as when, erupting at Pompei into the face of the amazed European world, it helped 'modern' Europeans to understand what daily life was like in ancient Italy.

Otherness is taking on a significant role, within the arts, as an eye opener and purview widener. None of us doubts the importance of the arts in their otherness helping to keep our perceptions fresh. We have abundant instances, from the arts' differing standpoints--from Stravinsky, Baudelaire, Frank Lloyd Wright, Joyce---of the way the arts can freshen our appreciations of the multiple ways we register the intensity of the world we inhabit.

The present author, like most of us, surely has a portfolio of examples, of the ways the otherness of an alien aesthetic perspective widens the individual's attentions and perceptions. I bring to mind a rainy afternoon in New Haven, after class in my graduate literature program. Tired, flat, hungry, I stepped for the first time inside the portal of the museum of the Yale Asia Institute. Just in time, it turned out, to see the opening of the Yale travelling netsuke exhibit. Splashes of miniature aesthetic brilliance took over two tired graduate student eyes; a coruscating alignment of beaded and lacquered belts, the Edo period's ultimate tribute to the double finesse of art and fashion.