Kurosawa's "Seven Samurai" and the Japanese Art Form

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Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai* and the Japanese Art Form

Akira Kurosawa, director of *Seven Samurai* (1954), is one of the most important and influential directors of all time. Kurosawa brings elements of traditional Japanese art to this more modern form, with techniques that replicate the fine attention to detail used in countless art forms in Japan.

Many forms of art that come from Japan rely on great attention to detail. A prime example of this is Zen paintings, but also among these forms are flower arrangement, tea ceremony, and landscape painting. In Damon Houx’s review of *Seven Samurai*, he speaks of Kurosawa’s dedication to detail in his film:

> Kurosawa took a year to make it. The long shoot helped lend Samurai an organic pacing, but it also highlighted how well Kurosawa uses nature … Kurosawa captures rain, winds, clouds, and shifts of light as few others have before or since. (Houx, 2)

Illustration A – *Seven Samurai* (Kurosawa, 1958)

A perfect example of Kurosawa’s fine attention to detail is in the final battle scene wherein Kanbe drops his sword in exchange for a bow during a rainstorm. As he releases each arrow from the bow, we can see the rain flying off the wet arrow as it travels through the air (Illustration A).
Subtle details such as these are often the most important part of the piece of art. In the Omi Hakkei, or Eight Views of Omi, there is one view titled “The Evening Bell at Mii-dera” (Illustration B). This view features the side of Hie-zan (Mt. Hie) where the temples Enryaku-Ji, Saikyo-Ji, and Mii-dera make their home.

“The Evening Bell at Mii-dera” focuses on Mii-dera singularly leaving the rest of Hie-zan and the other temples in the background or altogether left out. However, the view is from such a distance that Mii-dera itself is but a small section of the painting, with the bell tower only visible to those who know where to find it.

Kurosawa’s attention to detail extends to the point of obsession at some points:

The film’s formal perfectionism is remarkable even among Kurosawa’s works (e.g., large scale sets of the clinic and rows of stores and houses, props including a medicine cabinet with numerous drawers containing real medicines that never appear on-screen, authentic-looking costumes, actors’ natural performances). In fact, the film is so perfectly crafted that it exorcises from itself any kind of genuine conflict and disharmony, either among characters or between characters and environments. (Yoshimoto, 332)

This meticulous attempt to bring reality to the screen says much about the attitude Kurosawa had towards cinema. Many of the art forms of Japan, especially flower
arrangement and landscape painting, gain their visual strength from these details that one may not notice. In flower arrangement, much emphasis is put on the cut of the flower stem and on which pin in the stand they are placed. Although the viewer would never see the stand and especially the end of the flower stem, these are important details that those who practice this art follow.

Illustration C

Landscape painting also conforms to this attention of detail. In illustration C, the artist’s level of detail in recreating the mountainside town is evident. In the house on the bottom left of the painting, you are able to see individual windowpanes, and the valley set behind it is shrouded in a thick fog, while at some points, sections of a house can be seen. Instead of looking like a void in the color of the painting, the fog seems to be drawn in, as though the artist was able to draw the blankness that the fog created.

This type of detail is also prevalent in *Seven Samurai* as well as most of Kurosawa’s other films. As mentioned above, Kurosawa used the rain in the final battle scene to enact this level of detail. However, it can also be found outside of the cinematography.
The story of *Seven Samurai* is a simple one. A village recruits seven samurai in order to protect them from bandits who plan to ravage their home for food and supplies. However, as the film continues, it is hard to ignore the level of detail put into creating the world of the film. When the samurai first enter the village, they are not greeted with the warm welcome one would expect from a grateful village. Instead they are greeted with near hostility and distrust. Meulmester explains, “In the rigid world of *Seven Samurai* the most glorious acts are ones of rebellion: the impossible love story between the peasant girl and the samurai, or the peasant who pretends to be a samurai but can never convince the other samurai of his legitimacy.” (Meulmester, 2).

This fine attention to detail that is evident in *Seven Samurai* and almost every one of Akira Kurosawa’s films is reminiscent of numerous forms of Japanese art, including flower arrangement and landscape painting. Kurosawa may not draw direct influence from the art of Japan, but the methods he employs in his movies bears a striking resemblance to the techniques that make Japanese art unique.
Works Cited

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