In Praise of Faded Beauty

by Marc Yamada (East Asian Film and Literature)

I am always impressed with the capacity of the university to regenerate itself. Over time, the spaces through which we pass on campus lose their luster and require refurbishing: the carpet outside my office in the JFSB, worn from foot traffic, is replaced every few years; lawns are patched around campus (Cougars don’t cut corners!); and even entire buildings are regularly renovated or replaced. These updates ensure campus remains functional and beautiful for each new class of students.

Yet there are also spaces on campus that manifest beauty by revealing the passing of time rather than concealing it—spaces that demonstrate the traditional Japanese value of wabi-sabi, or the acceptance of transience and imperfection. The worn spots on the stairs in the northern end of the Harold B. Lee Library have memory that extends beyond the present moment. Replacing these stairs would update the space but would also remove it from the flow of time, like Botox injections on a pleasantly wrinkled face. It would conceal the traces of the many lives who have moved through the library over the years, on their way to study for finals, meet friends, or even run into the love of their lives. Where did they go? Where are they now?

The Japanese monk and author Yoshida Kenkō reminds us to find beauty in things not in their perfect state but in the moments before they reach completion or after they start to fade: “Are we to look at cherry blossoms only in full bloom, the moon only when it is cloudless? To long for the moon while looking on the rain, to lower the blinds and be unaware of the passing of the spring—these are even more deeply moving. Branches about to blossom or gardens strewn with flowers are worthier of our admiration.”

Kenkō’s words suggest that beauty is not just found in the imperishable and perfectly symmetrical, that this world is not just a lesser version of the eternal heavens above. Rather, the imperfections brought about by the passing of time provide a poignant depth to things, reminding us of the many layers of the past that shape objects as they age. Though our culture is obsessed with everything shiny and new, don’t we find more meaning in experiences that remind us of the past or connect us to our environment? Isn’t it more stimulating to walk through a seasonal farmers market than a climate-controlled shopping mall? Isn’t it more pleasing to sip hot chocolate from a cracked mug with a faded BYU logo than a soulless Ikea cup designed to keep its color throughout a nuclear winter?

Finding beauty in the passing of time and its effect on the objects that surround us can help us gain a deeper appreciation of the human condition. It can revitalize senses dulled by the homogenous noise of everyday life and awaken us to the true experience of mortality, enriching our passage through it.