

WHERE KNOWLEDGE AND ARTISTRY MEET

Japanese Reflections on the Beauty of Maps

Today we can retrieve geo-information from databases, perhaps over the internet, quite literally at the speed of light. But such information must be ordered within a representative framework - a map – to make sense to the human mind. Has the triumph of digital technology brushed aside beauty in mapping? The author, with a lifetime experience in map-making in Japan, reflects on this.

This is a modified version of an article earlier published in *The Japanese Journal of Survey*, May 2004. pp 37-38.

What do we mean when saying a map is beautiful? According to the dictionary, 'beautiful' means giving pleasure to the senses or the mind. It is not possible to make everyone agree upon the definition of an adjective expressing feelings such as beautiful, delicious or unpalatable. Whether a map is beautiful or not thus depends on the number of people who agree that the map deserves that prefix. For instance, people may disagree with the assertion that a map of Switzerland bearing a fine expression of the Alps is a beautiful map. Those who describe the map as beautiful may do so because the appearance of the Alps resembles a painting, with pleasant colours. One may even admire the beauty of a map so much that one wants to put it on the wall.

Colour and Form

How to make a map so beautiful that many people want to use it as wall decoration? And, referring to my own Japanese background, how to make a beautiful map of Japanese scenes using traditional Japanese methods? Although the use of just one colour may result in beautiful images, as Indian ink drawings clearly demonstrate, many people think a beautiful map should be a multi-colour print. However, colourfulness does not necessarily result in a beautiful map; it is not the number of colours that is important but the impression they give. If the appearance of the map is bright and not too showy, and if soft colours are present, pleasant to the eye, the map will often be appreciated as beautiful. When people ask me today what constitutes a beautiful map I answer by giving an example: The Ueno Shiki Meguri Map, Four Seasons in the Ueno Park is a beautiful map. Many people will agree with me. And that map is beautiful because colour is used in a fine way. Another element of beauty, which I do not treat here, is shape.

Japanese Painting

In map-making the method of abstraction of real-world phenomena is important. A phenomenon is represented by the graphic symbol of a feature according to a certain rule of portrayal. Mapmakers must represent the abstraction in an easy-to-understand way. This constraint often involves reducing the accuracy of data and changing the location of phenomena. Since today most maps are digitised it is really easy to adjust graphic symbols and characters to the designer's own taste. There are currently ideas in Japan of making maps with the appearance of Japanese traditional painting by representing lines or houses in the handwriting style of a writing brush. It is interesting to see such initiatives addressing the creation of novel rules of portrayal, setting stereotypes aside. However, I have some doubts about assigning the prefix 'beautiful' to these maps.

Artist as Editor

Some image-processing software packages facilitate the representation of maps in a perspective manner, as in the image of Mt Fuji and Fuji Five Lakes. Although this is a bird's-eye view image, it also shows strong map elements; it is made from computer-processed map data and was edited by artists. I feel it is pretty, and yet it is slightly different from photographs or scenery drawings; it makes me want to put it on the wall. This leads me to pronounce that making a beautiful map requires not only mapmaking knowledge but also the knowledge and conceptual skills of the artist.

Final Remarks

I lack enough knowledge of colour studies and artistic design for my opinion to be authoritative, but I hope that my Japanese compatriots are willing to co-operate with each other to make beautiful maps. These maps should so appeal to the eyes of foreigners that they are impressed with the scenery of Japan; this will also promote the Visit Japan Campaign.