***Ancient Japanese Culture - The Heian Aristocracy***

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In ancient Japanese culture the aristocrats of the Heian period (794-1191) are probably the most fascinating. Many of their their values, practices, and customs seem to be almost opposite to what we view as obvious or "normal" in contemporary society. Aristocrats were members of society who held rank in the Imperial Court. There was little room for social mobility in Heian Japan and rank was either inherited or granted from the Emperor himself. Although only 1% of the population were aristocrats, almost all the historical literature from this time period is written by the aristocracy about the aristocracy. There is very little known about the lifestyle of the common people during Heian Japan.

Romance was very much alive during this period. If a man saw a woman of good taste and wanted to meet her he would first find out where she lived. He would then compose a poem of about three lines of verse. Everything about the poem required perfection, including the handwriting, paper, and type of perfume used to scent the letter and envelope. Depending upon the season and circumstances, a suitable tree sprig or flower would be selected and attached to the letter. After judging the man's level of refinement and taste from the poem, the woman might then decide to invite the man for a visit. On the first meeting the woman would sit behind a screen so that only her outline could be seen and the two would chat and possibly exchange poems. If sufficient hints were provided by both parties then a physical relationship could follow.

The concept of beauty was greatly different during the Heian than it is now. Many rules of beauty applied to both sexes. The nude body was considered ugly and must always be clothed, often with many layers of clothing. Choice of outfit was critical and even a small mistake could be a source of great embarrassment or destroy a reputation. For both genders a plump figure, round puffy face, powdery white skin, and small eyes were considered ideal. A thin figure and dark skin was associated with the peasant class who worked often worked outdoors and did not get enough to eat.

Some rules were more specific to women. White teeth were ugly by Heian aristocrats and women blackened their teeth with a sticky black dye. When smiling or laughing a woman's mouth might have appeared as a toothless, dark oval. Women also had to reposition their eyebrows as mother nature had apparently made a mistake. To correct the "mistake" eyebrows were plucked out and then painted on, usually rather thick, about 2-3 centimeters above the original location. Long hair was another feature considered attractive and women often grew their hair out so that is was longer than their body length. Washing all of this hair was a job for the servants and could be an all-day event.

There were also rules of beauty and appearance that were specific to men. A large amount of facial hair was not attractive, but a thin mustache and/or a small tuft of beard on the chin was considered ideal. Men may not have needed to pluck their eyebrows, but idealized depictions from this period show the eyebrows high on the forehead. Aristocratic men from this period have a reputation for being feminine and in some artwork it is difficult to tell men and women apart. This is especially apparent in depictions of children and young adults. Things have changed a lot since the time of the Heian aristocracy, but familiarizing ourselves with their views on the world helps to put our own contemporary values in perspective.