

Japan Diary

Stocktaking

In northern latitudes, it is the first mild sunny day of spring that urges housewives to start cleaning out their homes, putting out to air the things that have got frowsty over the winter. In Japan, fall is more often the time for this activity. We gingerly open boxes and cupboards to see how well things have survived the heat and humidity of summer. Even today, when concrete buildings and airconditioning offer more resistance to the climate, it is not uncommon to find with dismay that color slides have become three-dimensional abstracts, moths have set up house in a favorite sweater, and a black leather jacket has miraculously turned into green suede.

This annual turnout—shall we call it “fall-cleaning”?—is not confined to the householder; all over Japan, it seems that stocktaking is going on in temples, shrines, and treasure houses.

Around the Todaiji temple in Japan's ancient capital, Nara, it seems the work is never done. Way back in July, the annual cleaning of the giant Buddha statue was carried out. This is not really for inspection, just removal of dust—20 bucketfuls on average—but it is an eerie operation. A hundred and forty people, priests and devotees, swathe themselves from head to foot in flowing white robes. Mouths are covered with white masks too. This is to prevent them from polluting the statue by sacrilegiously breathing on it, but as a reward for this piety, they get their lungs protected from the dust.

Soul moves out

The chief priest holds a ceremony in which the soul of the 16-meter gilt bronze

statue is invited to move out for a while, and then, once it has been vacated by its divine occupant, the white-clad one hundred-and-forty swarm up like climbers of Mount Fuji at the peak of the season. The hardier ones are let down from the ceiling in boatswains' chairs, while two or three with a good head for heights walk out into the upturned left palm and ply their soft white mops. Three hours later, they all reach plinth level, and gather up the 20 bucketfuls.

As the autumn rolls in, it is the same Todaiji that sees what must be among the world's most valuable inventory-takings. Once a year, the Shoso-in treasures are checked and the building itself opened for an airing.

The Shoso-in is a treasure house that originally belonged to the temple, though it is now the responsibility of a government office. Even empty, the building itself is an architectural treasure, an outstanding example of the old *azekura* technique. It is the ultimate in log cabins—no upright beams to keep it in shape, but a



rigid structure of interlocking slabs of wood. Whole logs are trimmed to have a cross-section the shape of an isosceles triangle, which means that the contact surface is some 10cms wide. This gives a solid weatherproof surface as well as an aesthetically pleasing corrugated texture. The building is raised on wooden piles, and the fact that its floor is some nine feet off the ground may have something to do with ensuring the preservation of the treasures that were long housed there. However, the airtight wooden chests they were kept in probably had a greater effect. Although it looks from the outside like one single building, it actually contains three compartments, the North, South, and Central storerooms.

Eggs in two baskets

Since World War II the priceless contents themselves have been moved out of the Shoso-in into two nearby ferroconcrete buildings, a wise move in the sense of not having all one's eggs in one basket. Most historical wooden buildings in Japan are relatively modern replicas of many-times-burnt-down originals; that the Shoso-in and its contents should have won through to the late 20th century only means that it is now pushing its luck. From the fire started by a lightning strike in 1254 (promptly dowsed by neighbors), down through earthquakes and storms, freezing winters and steamy summers, the building and the things it has guarded so well have survived. And what things!

The core of the collection consists of objects donated to Todaiji by the Empress Komyo after the death of her husband, the Emperor Shomu, in 756 A.D. Komyo was the first commoner to become an imperial consort, and she was clearly an intelligent and able woman who shared many of the duties of her husband. There is always a danger of reading one's own cultural values into a quite different lifestyle, but Komyo's action, on the forty-ninth day of her widowhood, in presenting to the temple a large number of valuable objects that had been used regularly by her husband, with the comment that seeing them was a constant and painful reminder of her loss, adds to the impression that this was a remarkably "modern" marriage in its suggestion of a happy relationship combined with a working partnership.

She made several other, similar, donations later. The collection includes articles used at court, poems composed and written by both Shomu and Komyo, musical instruments, weapons, and a whole compendium of medicines—rare imports, some of them—for the monks to dispense free of charge to those who needed them. The document recording

the donation, itself a calligraphy specimen of merit, lists far more objects than have survived to the present day, but still there are over 100 items dating from that time, plus almost 40 medicine samples. Not all the attrition is due to wear and tear. Nearly all the armor and weapons were removed and put to use in a rebellion in 764.

Fortunately, the solidly-built repository with its valuable contents attracted other treasures. First, other items connected with the reign of the Emperor Shomu were transferred to it in about the year 950 from another storehouse that was not wearing so well. These items seem to have been less accurately listed, and to this day it is difficult to assess just what was brought in. The inventories made at various times—even the modern ones—are a researcher's nightmare, especially since the Japanese language has no plural, and numbers were not always included; thus, "Item: knife" comprises 60 knives, "Item: bamboo flower container" covers over 500 of them, while "Item: arrow" takes you well into the thousands.

There is another problem, too: each curator or researcher has his own way of looking at things, and one object may fall into many different classifications. One has only to live in Japan a few months to discover that, even in daily life, the Japanese do not necessarily follow the groupings that the westerner assumes to be universal. On reflection, we can see the sense in selling teapots and cups in shops that sell tea; but *why* do they sell dried seaweed there as well? Likewise, there is a historical reason for liquor shops to have a large SALT sign outside, but it is not a connection that leaps to the non-Japanese mind.

Computers to end problems

So it is with the Shoso-in collection. For instance, it has an important collection of *washi*, Japanese paper, including the earliest extant specimens. No work on *washi* is complete without a reference to the samples here. But some of the most important pieces are documents; moreover, some of the documents are the early catalogues themselves, which are also interesting examples of calligraphy.

Then again, do you classify an object according to its use, or what it is made of, or where it has come from, or who it belonged to? Perhaps, with the advent of the computer that works in Japanese, the end of this confusion is at last in sight. Cross-indexing is within the grasp of the specialized civil servants who, every autumn, spend 40 days checking the inventory and making a selection of items to display in the Nara National Museum for 15 days.

This year's exhibition is from October 28 to November 11, when the general public will be allowed to walk round the outside of the original wooden *azekura* building. Altogether 87 pieces, falling into 79 categories, will be shown, of which 26 items in 24 categories will be on view for the first time.

This year textile buffs will be especially pleased, for among the items on view for the first time are examples of silk brocade and twill—obis and fragments of larger objects. There are also some scrolls from the Shoso-in and Tonan-in archives. Other "new" items are two shallow flower baskets, and gilt items. Previously shown favorites will appear again, notably a beautiful spherical silver incense-burner with its no-spill brazier mounted on gimbals inside, designed to perfume clothing. This particular treasure had the lower half replaced a century ago, but again and again one has the feeling that the things are new, so excellent is the preservation, especially with the metal and ceramic objects.

These are treasures that wear their age lightly—can they really be 1,200 years old? We are looking at one of the most remarkable collections in the world. The neat, beautiful, and remarkably readable calligraphy of the Emperor and Empress, the clothes and jewelry they wore, the articles they handled, have the power to take us back in a breath of time to a civilized couple who ruled together, and apparently had a good marriage into the bargain. That is something that defies all attempts at classification. Item: happiness?

(Doreen Simmons, *special adviser to the Foreign Press Center in Tokyo*)

Bookshelf

Appointment in Japan

By G. C. Allen

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196 pages; £12.50

In mid-September 1922, young George Allen arrived at the port of Kobe after a long sea voyage. Just graduated from the University of Birmingham, Allen came to Japan at the invitation of the government to serve as a lecturer at the Commercial High School in Nagoya. He taught in Nagoya for 2½ years. In the summer and fall of 1936 Allen was again back in Japan, this time to study the Japanese economy. He also came back several times after