

# ***With Bow and Horse***

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley







The light this day has the color of another age. It seeps from the low and leaden clouds, riding the thin drizzle to earth; it paints the landscape in somber, ancient colors.

At the far end of the rope-edged path are the riders, mounted and waiting. Their energy is strong and I feel each of them fighting the discipline that holds his feelings in check. The horses throw their heads and fidget in place. They too are tense.

A man steps to the nearer end of the path. The color and shape of his dress make him appear to have stepped from some antique painted scroll. He opens a fan, and holding it overhead at arm's length, moves it in a deliberate, accurate arc. He finishes this elegant signal and steps aside.

A horse and rider explode forward from the far end of the path. Hardly has this rushing gallop begun when the rider smartly draws an arrow down and out of his sash—its two mates remain in place—and in one smooth motion fits it to the bowstring. He draws his tall bow to its fullest, letting the arrow fly as his mount thunders past the pole-mounted target to his left. Without pause, he repeats the same motions twice again before his mount charges him past the end of the path.

Two more mounted archers come in turn, each with the same series of motions in the same elegant rhythm. It is ancient, noble and stirring, this combination of man and horse and bow and arrow. It is called *yabusame*, and it is an old and truly Japanese warrior's art that traces its present form back across more than seven centuries. Its roots are likely more than twice as old and stretch deep into the Asian continent. The *yabusame* that I see this day took its form at the time when the warrior class had eclipsed in power the imperial nobility of Kyoto. Those warriors established themselves at Kamakura, far from the effete manners and mores of the old capital.

In that age, the culture of the warrior was called *kyuba no michi*, which means "the way of the bow and horse." Skill in the handling of these was the mark of a man, and *yabusame* was one way of demonstrating that mastery. However, *yabusame* was not and is not a mere performance, an empty exhibition, a sideshow. In common with other Japanese ways of the sword, the writing brush or the tea whisk, *yabusame* requires much in the way of time, devotion, energy and patience, things that are increasingly uncommon anywhere outside the workplace in modern, urban Japan. But there are a few who cherish this old and difficult tradition; they keep it alive even in this most frenetically paced of nations.

It is a little sad that today's unkind sky has caused these horsemen-archers to forgo the splendid ceremonial dress of brocade and leather that are characteristic of the ritual of *yabusame*. If ruined, they are not easily replaced, as the craftsmen who can make them are few and becoming even fewer as the years pass. Today, their robes are the cotton ones used for practice, augmented of course with the traditional *jingasa* (war hat), *tachi* (long sword) and *wakizashi* (short sword). With these and their great asymmetric bows they are a vision of another Japan of another age.

As the last of the three riders dashes past the end of the path, he turns his mount to join the others. At this moment, the clouds reach the end of their forbearance; the sky opens and a stinging rain slashes down. The riders draw together, disappearing into the gray curtain. In a moment they are gone, like a dream upon a sudden awakening.

Michael E. Stanley, born in California in 1947, studied cultural anthropology and archaeology, and is a photographer based in Japan since 1979.