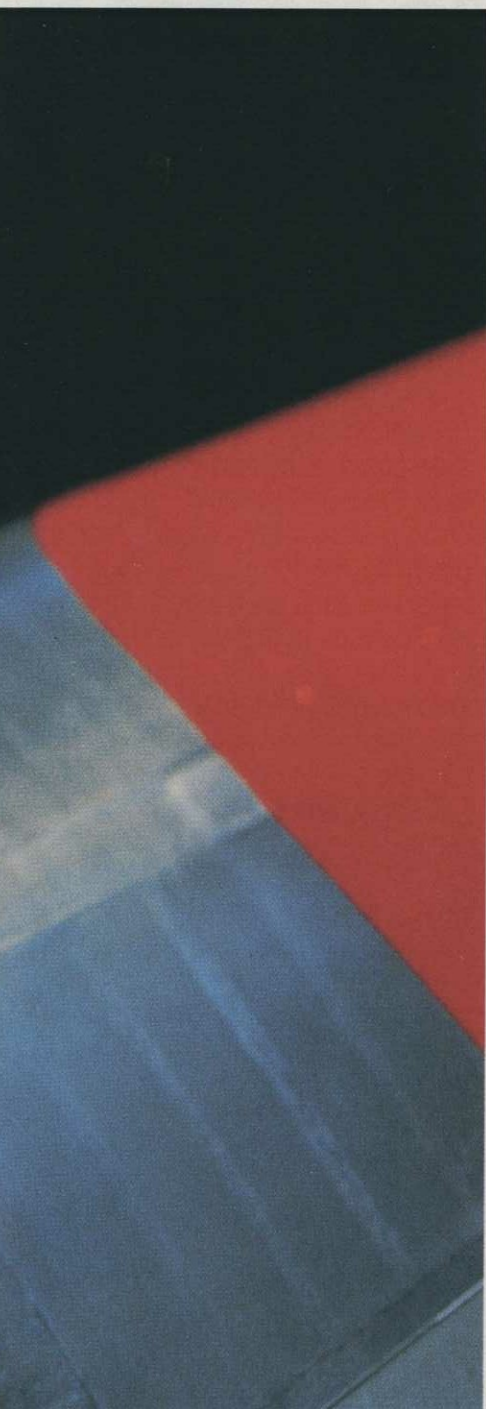


At Narita

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley





I am nearly alone in the room; a monastic quiet folds itself over the exhibits. In front of one exhibit, I stand unmoving for a few moments and stare down at the angular object on display.

It is of bright metal, highlighted by the sharp and scientific glare of the lights overhead. Its quicksilver-shiny fuselage and red-painted wings seem to leap up from the boxy clear case confining them. It is a miniature of an aircraft built in Japan in the 1930s for research into performance at higher altitudes and greater speeds than those that were the norm at the time. It is an exquisite model, built with infinite patience. Each tiny rivet and seam is faithful to those of the original.

Closing my eyes, I can imagine the staccato roar of the engine and the flashing whirl of the propeller; they seem so alive, these sensations. But the aircraft itself is long gone; we have only this model as a reminder of its existence, preserving under glass panes the immobile form of the original much as ancient amber holds the once-living shapes of creatures long since expired. And as the leather helmets and the white silk scarves of that time are now firmly fixed in the past tense, so is that airplane and its memory.

Once it was the vanguard of this nation's technology. The men who built it and the men who flew it were the idols of schoolboys. All are now enshrined in thoughts of the 'good old days'; thoughts that are at once both more and less than memory. What was the highest of 'hi-tech' is now romantic. Time has transmuted science and experiment into emotion.

Now, in our more advanced age, we worship a higher technology that has grown upon that so haloed with memory. Airliners can now whisk us across continents and oceans. Distances once measured in months are now traversed in hours. Communication of word, of image, is nearly instantaneous. How much

our lives have changed since the aircraft on which this display model is based took to the air. And we have changed, too; perhaps not entirely for the better.

Where once patience was a common social currency, there is now an impolite haste. What is not quick, is not good. We are unforgiving to the edge of anger if a bus or train is a few minutes late, delayed perhaps by traffic or inclement weather. Our technology has brought us speed and ease and convenience in many things, but with them have come a new set of 'values'. And what was thought the key to making life less difficult and stressful has in fact added its own set of difficulties and stresses. Perhaps we might wait a while to let our souls catch up with what our hands and minds can do.

The other people—a family with two young boys, a pair of serene-faced oldsters—have now left this part of the museum. Outside, beyond this quiet cloister of aeronautic nostalgia, a giant jetliner settles in for its landing. Its keening whine pierces the walls, ebbing away into a gentle rumbly whisper. So near, but so distant.

A few moments later, another comes, and then another. They remind me that I must cross continents this day.

In the museum's lobby, I impatiently await my taxi. I have a plane to catch, and I have been passing a few quiet hours in this little aviation museum here at Narita. But the departure hour draws near. I must hurry, and stand in line, and wait and be modern again.

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