

In the Cool and Quiet

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

I stand in the somber silence and wonder at the emptiness of the place. It must be an illusion. It cannot be what it is, where it is. But this too is Tokyo.

Only the distant muffled rumble of trains and traffic hints that there is a strident, teeming city beyond these walls and windows. Within, time and motion have stopped. Even the air does not stir; no undisciplined dust motes dare mar its silent clarity.

A red carpet runs the length of the passageway, seamlessly drawing the eye of the beholder to an apparent vanishing point far down the corridor. My gaze comes to rest there, held on that far end of the carpet by something I cannot clearly sense. My eyes do not move.

I take a step on the carpet. What I expect to be the soft and subtle noise of my restrained footfall rasps into the air with an ugly sibilance. It tears at my ears; I halt and stand quietly again.

Beyond these walls, in other corridors, floods of people wash up and down the staircases, splashing through the wickets at the ends and flowing onto the trains that ceaselessly move in and out of the station. On this day—a Friday—more than a million people will make up the tide. But not one of them will disturb the unmoving quietude of the place where I now stand. Very likely, none of them will ever see it in their lifetimes.

The red-brick edifice of Tokyo Station was completed in 1914 as the centerpiece of Japan's growing rail system. It rapidly became a symbol of Tokyo and its 'Golden Age,' a time when East met West and each invigorated the other as they grew together into the young century. The ancient, too, grew with what was new. This passageway is proof of that.

A broad avenue led—and still leads—right up to the center of the station's facade. At its opposite end is the Imperial Palace. Before Boeing built jets to wing mankind across oceans and continents, steel rails and steel wheels and steel carriages were the newest of the new, the grandest of the grand.

When the Emperor of Japan wished to move through his fast-growing nation, he moved by rail. He boarded his special trains at this station, walking unhurriedly down this corridor to the facilities reserved for the use of the Imperial family. The corridor is reserved still, along with a complex of waiting rooms off to one side of the entrance. Those rooms, like the corridor, are still and cool. I am told that an Emperor has never had to wait in them.

Of course, what I see before me is not what Emperor Taisho saw when he first passed this way to board his waiting train. War and earthquake and the passage of years have made their changes. But the spirit of the place is the same. And between these walls, the air and the silence are yet ancient, far removed from the sound and the rush of modern Tokyo swirling outside.

I turn to go. My escort turns with me, closing and locking the great doors after us. The light and air and silence beyond the doors are already turning into dry memory. But a part of it will remain alive in me. With muted clicks, the last lock's bolt slides into place. This too is Tokyo.

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



