

With a Tea Master

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley



All the sensations are subdued. A soft light washes through the paper window and the gently boiling tea kettle whispers a long sibilant sigh. The utensils for the making of the tea are laid out precisely in their proper places. We guests, followed by our host, have entered the room. Each of us sits in a prescribed place. Our legs are correctly folded beneath each of us in the formal manner.

This is what is called in English a "tea ceremony," although the tea is not the familiar kind served with cream or lemon nor is it the fragrant brew served up at the end of a Chinese banquet. And to unaccustomed eyes the whole affair seems to be far divorced from any real notion of "ceremony." Its essence is one of assiduous understatement. Even its language is restrained: the "ceremony" itself is *otemae*, meaning literally "the hand in front"; the whole corpus of manners and motions is *chanoyu*—simply "hot water for tea"—or *sado*—merely "the way of tea."

Our host has begun making the tea. With measured, careful movements she formally "cleanses" the tea scoop and tea holder and tea bowl, although all of these have been carefully cleaned and prepared long before the guests' arrival. Each of her movements is prescribed but not mechanical, predictable but eminently natural. This distinguishes the master. As her hands carry the utensils through the complex series of movements, each motion both betrays and belies the nature of the object in use. Heavier objects are borne as if of little weight; lighter objects seem heavier to her hand than they are.

At last the preparations are finished and she opens the tea caddy and carefully lifts out a measure of the green powdered tea with the elegantly curved bamboo tea scoop. She slowly turns the scoop over the tea bowl on the *tatami* in

front of her and the jadelike powder falls into the bowl's glazed abyss. She takes another, smaller measure of the tea with the scoop and repeats the same motions, finishing by tapping the side of the scoop on the rim of the bowl.

A tiny ringing sound leaps out and then is gone. It is—it was—a beautiful sound. The silence before and after encloses it, embraces it. The silence too is the sound. In its moment, it is all. Outside the paper window and earthen walls, the modern city is for that instant one of another time, of warriors and merchants and courtesans and all the figures from all the paintings and prints I have ever seen of a place transformed ere I drew my first breath. The pastimes and problems of now have melted away, and I with them.

The murmurs of the hot water being poured into the tea bowl bring me back again. I watch as my host whips the tea into a pale green froth and sets the bowl before me. Each bubble reflects a miniature of the room and all in it. The kettle is still sighing as I bring the bowl to my lips.

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