

# At the Brush's End

*Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley*





A scene so classically Japanese: a late autumn afternoon, sunlight sifts through the *shoji*, incense lightly rides the still air. Sitting on the tatami mats of the small room, Mr. Kishida writes. I watch his hand and the brush it holds.


Black wetness swirls, swept and driven across blank expanse. Motion becomes stark line and angle; midnight slashes stab across paper's white purity. The brush halts, hesitates, and is withdrawn. It returns to the brush rest carved of wood and jade. For a moment the rhythm of the writing waits, suspended. A new sheet of paper appears, and the brush rises again. Touched to the inkstone, it drinks deeply of the liquid shadow puddled there. And once more it meets the paper to leave its black-gleaming wake.

The who and when of the world's earliest ink are unknown. Ancients around the globe used a spectrum of dark concoctions to interpret in pictures or symbols the worlds they knew. Some used the ink of squid and cuttlefish, others tried ground minerals, the staining liquid of galls, or fine charcoal or lampblack. The Chinese of the Han Dynasty perfected an ink of pine soot and fish glue, using it to write on silk and slips of bamboo; paper appeared in China about the 2nd century of the modern era. The two were soon mated: calligraphy, born of ink and paper and a pictographic writing system, rapidly emerged as a fine art. Wherever Chinese culture left its influence, paper and ink and a reverence for the written word remained. Japan was no exception.

Nara, just east of Osaka in west-central Honshu, was the capital of Japan for some 70 years during the Eighth Century. Although much of modern Nara is typical Japanese urban jumble, its heart is still laid out on an ancient grid of streets and byways. While Osaka and Tokyo may boast famous warlords, statesmen, and captains of industry, much of

Nara's pride rests on its heritage of refined culture, especially the literary arts. It is not surprising, therefore, that about 90% of all the traditional inks for calligraphy and painting originate here. The city's premier maker of *sumi*—inksticks—is the firm of Kobaien, founded in 1577. In that year, one Matsui Dochin devoted his workshop to the making of ink; the rest, as they say, is history.

Now Kobaien's catalog lists 73 different standard varieties of ink in stick form. Certain of these are shaped in well-preserved antique molds and are treasured as a sort of collectible "limited edition" *sumi*; it is obvious that such elegant and expensive items never feel an inkstone. There are various inks specifically suited for certain genres of calligraphy and ink painting, even gold and silver inks for the writing of Buddhist scripture. But not all is traditional. "We have to keep up with the times," comments Mr. Kishida, who works in Kobaien's business office. "Musk and ambergris—animal products from endangered species—were traditional *sumi* ingredients, but now we use artificial materials in their place. Environmental consciousness extends even to ink now. And it's also less expensive as well," he tells me as he concentrates on slowly grinding an ink stick. He adds water from a tiny pitcher, then looks up and continues: "We also make two kinds of bottled ink, which is more difficult than you might think. Once ground and mixed with water, *sumi* is almost a living thing. It will oxidize and separate and become useless, so what's in the bottle is more than just ground and dissolved stick ink. So we keep up with the times."

He looks back at the blank rectangle before him and touches his brush to the ink. The writing begins. 

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