

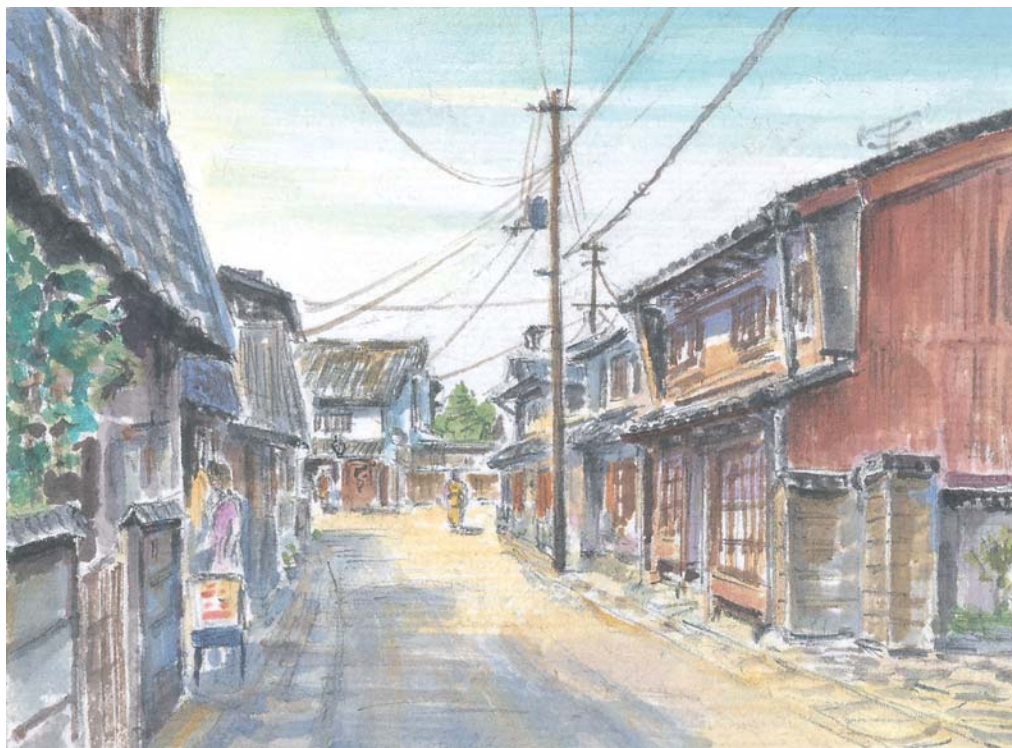
Ancient Nara

Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

THE old town of Nara is often overlooked by tourists in their rush to Todaiji temple to see the world's largest bronze image of Buddha, to Horyuji temple with the world's oldest wooden building, or to the plethora of other famous sites accommodating important national treasures. Yet to me it is one of the more interesting towns in Japan. A huge amount of Edo (1603-1867) and Meiji (1868-1912) period houses remain, still being used as homes and shops. This is something you certainly cannot find in Kyoto where little but temples, gardens and cultural treasures have been preserved. And it's something that I hope won't change much until Japan sets up some strong preservation laws to prevent the tearing down of this architectural legacy in the name of modernization or in response to the inheritance tax.

Nara itself has a long history. Founded in 710 and named Heijokyo, the "citadel of peace," it was designed after the Chinese city of Xian. The smallpox epidemic in 737 is said to have prompted Emperor Shomu to turn away from his former hedonistic life to Buddhism. He and his consort, Empress Komyo, then devoted themselves to building temples, monasteries, nunneries, orphanages and centers for medical care for the poor, sick and elderly. Nara blossomed until it was abandoned for another capital in 784.

Many of the religious edifices survived the departure of the capital. Despite destruction by fire, wars and earthquakes, much of the original splendor still survives, having been occasionally rebuilt and refurbished over the past 1,300 some years. Its architectural and artistic grandeur remain to be enjoyed, offering some of the oldest and most artistic remnants of Japan's past. To get a feel for the flow of the past, I visited Asuka, an area that contains Fujiwarakyo, the capital previous to Nara, and viewed the vista from a hill known as Amakashi-no-oka. Today's view, although popular with Japanese tourists for the opportunity of seeing the



ancient hills of Unebiyama, Miminashiyama and Amanokaguyama, mentioned in the ancient *Nihon Shoki* (Chronicles of Japan), strikes me as somewhat sad. Urban sprawl, modern high-rises and smokestacks all but smother the ancient hills jutting above them.

Nara, however, has weathered the years much better. Walking along narrow streets like Kamitsumichi Kaido in the old section called "Nara Machi" is a peaceful experience. Few cars traverse this area; people get around on foot and bicycle. The one or two story houses afford a wide expanse of sky above their clay roof tiles, punctuated by curious street lamps of the past. I especially like these lamps. One swath of the street will have a certain kind, other areas bear those of a different period. As in all of Japan, including Tokyo's old areas, the old lights have designs. Often art deco looking, of all shapes and sometimes colors, they are small overlooked treasures in a world so bent on the uniform and practical.

The area was once taxed according to the width of a home along the road and this is clearly reflected in the buildings. They may be narrow, but they extend surprisingly far back. Looking into a teashop built over a hundred years ago you can see all the way to a garden in the back. The second floor

of the shop looks as if it has been squashed down to half its intended height – also, I’m told, a yesteryear attempt to avoid taxes. Their curious “*mushiko* windows” are thus named because they look like wicker bug cages.

Old rice shops, antique shops, a potter’s studio, a greengrocer and tidy shops selling fabrics and trinkets obviously aimed at a tourist like me line the streets. Yet, perhaps because the area is inaccessible by bus or because there are just too many famous temples and shrines in the area to be seen, I had – apart from the locals and a scattering of cats – the old town to myself.

In the section of Inoue-Cho is a reproduction of a “*Machiya*,” a shop and house combination prevalent in the Edo period, where we can enter and poke around. Interfacing with the street are thin wooden slats called *koshi* that enable the sliding walls to be thrown open to the breezes while at the same time protecting the privacy of the interior. Three narrow *tatami* rooms head off toward a lovely garden with trees on the back. What fascinates me about housing of this kind is that the roofs of a series of small buildings (bath building, toilet building and another large one room structure in back) situated around the garden intermingle in such a way that you are unaware of whether you are outdoors or indoors – the spaces merge. One roof will be protecting you from the rain while you are standing on the hallway of another building entirely.

Still another old home, dating from the early 20th century and partially open to the public, is that of a former mosquito net maker. Initially used exclusively by noblemen, “*kaya*” or mosquito nets came to be used by commoners in the late Meiji and Taisho (1912-1926) periods, and Nara became one of the three Japanese centers of production. The splendid layout and the large impressive garden are reminders of prosperity long past.

I decided to stay within walking distance of Nara Machi at the Kikusui-ro, one of only five Japanese inns in Japan that are designated as cultural treasures. The old part of this inn dates back to Edo times and its “new building” from Meiji 22 (1890). An impressive list of people have stayed here, including J.P. Morgan. The 14 suites of rooms are, for the most part, used by repeat customers; the inn’s economic survival depends on five reception rooms used for weddings and parties.

I was led to my accommodations in the Peony Rooms by a gracious lady in *kimono* who then proffered a two-tiered ceramic cup with a type of mouthwash in the top portion. As the custom in days of old, I was instructed to swill out my mouth with this and then spit it out in the bottom section. That being done, tea and sweets were served.

Staying at this inn was an introduction to a different idea

of life. The rooms are appointed with valuable artwork and I had my own private garden to gaze upon. The pleasure was in savoring the surroundings and enjoying a very slow pace, the intervals of which were determined by a staff intent on serving my needs as well as entertaining me culturally.

During a ten-course dinner in my rooms, Okamoto Hiroyuki, the third-generation proprietor of the inn, sat by me in formal *kimono* and *hakama* and “engaged me” in conversation. He taught me some precious lessons. Good food, especially Japanese gourmet *kaiseki* dishes, must not be served all at once. The *sashimi* (raw fish) goes dry and, besides, it is aesthetically unpleasant. Each course was carried in separately on elegant, museum-grade dinnerware to be admired before consumption. Okamoto says that “*ma*,” empty space or “interludes,” is vital for a good dinner; intervals between courses are as essential to the pleasure of a meal as the food itself. He served me *sake* between courses and told me that one must never drink sake while eating, but only between courses to wash out the palate while conversing and relaxing before the next delicacy arrives.

That such service still survives in today’s pragmatic hustle-bustle world is a miracle. Okamoto explained to me that there are relatively few Japanese today who are sophisticated enough to know how to enjoy a stay there properly. Kikusui-ro, unlike hotels or modern inns, has no set routine for guests. Some customers want quiet, others want to talk, and others like the Imperial family need to have the screens taken away and things adjusted to what is appropriate for them. Their preferences and requirements are the principal focus of the staff.

Okamoto explained that guests at regular accommodations are expected to adjust themselves to the services offered. At Kikusui-ro it is just the opposite: sleeping and feeding the guests is only a marginal part of their services. He observes his guests and responds to them with selected conversation and painstaking care.

Okamoto despairs that the Japanese are being stripped of their refinement and ability to communicate and that the hundreds of years of layers of sophisticated culture are fading away. The inn, however, is delighted to accommodate foreigners who want an experience of former Japan. It is an opportunity too good to be missed. **JS**

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