

Japan: Land of Fascinating Contrasts

By Muazaz Kasrawi

My fascination with the land of the Rising Sun goes back to the tender days of my teenage years. It began when I saw a documentary about the origins of *ikebana* and the tea ceremony. The film was about a young woman who wanted to express her devotion to the young man she had fallen in love with. They had a rendezvous and she served him tea according to the traditions of the tea ceremony. In the background there was a beautiful flower arrangement with a single rose. In my mind I thought she was expressing a romantic message telling him that he was the only and the most beautiful person in her life.

From that moment, I always dreamed that one day I would visit Japan — the source of that romantic feeling I associated with the country. Days passed by and I met a dashing young diplomat at the Jordanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs where I worked. We got married and had several postings and one day the exciting news came that we would be going to Japan. Memories flashed back to the times of those romantic days. Reality suddenly struck after our arrival at Narita Airport. Driving home, I saw almost nothing but gray walls stretching to nowhere instead of the beautiful and unique structures adorning the landscape that I had expected. Silently my mind wondered: where is the beautiful Japan that I had always thought of.



Ikebana by Professor Ito Masao, Ikenobo: a flower arrangement based on his image of the historic city of Petra in Jordan

Photo: Ikenobo Society of Floral Art

Luckily this feeling did not last long. Next morning I ventured into my neighborhood of Tomigaya and Shoto, where I found beautiful Japanese homes and gardens, though sadly they were few in number. My first foray happened sometime in September when the neighbors were celebrating a *matsuri* festival. I was so happy to see them in their *yukata* and *kimonos* carrying *mikoshi*. Right there and then, I felt a great relief that my expectations were not doomed. Since that time, wherever I went, I noted a vast contrast embodied in the form of a most beautiful and fascinating mixture of both the old and the new, the modern and the traditional. Among the contrasts I saw, while strolling in our

area of narrow streets, were high modern buildings next to traditional wooden houses that had survived the passage of time. Each appeared to be relaying a message saying they represented the true face of Japan: the old with its mystique and glory; the new with its imposing presence and power. Though they appear as two parallel developments, one representing harmony with nature and the other indifference to it, these parallels cross each other and even merge. One gets the same impression when watching people in these surroundings. There you also see the two faces of Japan: one clad in traditional garb and the other in modern attire. During my eight years, I learned that the contrast



People carrying mikoshi at a matsuri festival in Tomigaya

one sees in the outward appearances of people's attire does not reflect or correspond to their inner thoughts or feelings. Both of them remain loyal followers in their souls and hearts to their traditional values and customs, while grasping and adapting the best of scientific and technical ideas without the loss of their valued traditions.

Let me give an example. At the 1992 World Convention of Ikebana International, a massive modern flower arrangement was produced by a gentle seventy-five year-old Japanese lady, whose very traditional look and manner made the participants expect to see an arrangement reflecting her outward appearance. But to our surprise, her work revealed a sense of modernity and proportion in thought and structure, that a non-Japanese

would not expect from her. On the other end of the scale, whenever I find myself engaged in discussions with highly educated young people, I am bewildered to discover how deeply the fine old values and traditions have a hold on them. In Japan one cannot associate the modern and the traditional with outside appearances. This is one aspect of the contrasts that have fascinated me about Japan. My belief in these observations were reinforced when I saw, while writing this article, an exhibition of the paintings of the artist Hiratsuka Yuji. The press release introducing his work by the Tolman Gallery says, "Yuji's work depicts his idea of Japan, the 'land of contrasts'. Behind what appears to be thoroughly western characteristics, there lies a deeper

layer of old thoughts."

In Japan, things are so refined, delicate and beautiful because much care is exerted to do things in harmony with the beauty of nature and aesthetic principles. If we take a wedding for example, the efforts spent are enormous. Be it flower arrangements, food preparation or card design, every minute detail has to be thought of carefully and produced beautifully. Yet the wedding cake, a noticeably important part of the event, is to my surprise a prefabricated artificial ornamentation. I cannot help saying: What a contrast!

As a woman, I find a fascinating example of this contrast in the outward appearance of Japanese women. This is best described by a poet who compared Japanese women to the

nadeshiko flower. The *nadeshiko* appears dainty with soft colors, but has a very strong stem and roots. This is exactly how Japanese women are: soft, gentle and demure in mannerism, yet when you get to know them you discover their hidden strength. Their character and behavior hide their strong will and determination. As I see it, this fragile woman is the manager of the family, raises and educates the children, and fully organizes the financial affairs of the family. This by itself is no small task; she is almost alone fully responsible for the family life. Since the family is at the core of a healthy society, her contribution to the welfare of Japanese society is quite considerable. This brings to my mind an incident with my husband after we first arrived in Japan. He was thrilled and happy to be treated as a "sultan". From being ushered and served before me, to women holding the doors for him to go first. That was something he liked. Such an attitude can be seen in the misconception by foreigners of the role of women in Japan, that they are always one step behind the men who come first. My husband stopped his mumblings about the privileges of men here, when I reminded him that he has to surrender his salary to me every month as is the case in Japan in order to be treated as a Japanese man. I always enjoy watching the astonishment on the faces of our men and women when I explain these facts to them about the actual situation of Japanese women.

These feelings of mine are not only derived from the sight of the people and the surroundings, but have strongly evolved from observing and getting to know my Japanese friends. That is how I came to know that



The beauty of the Japanese architectural style must not be forgotten

behind the most modern and westernized Japanese, there lies a deeply rooted traditional person. And at the same time behind a traditionally clad person, we find a most fascinating ultra modern mind and thoughts. I have the highest respect for the Japanese individuals who carry the *mikoshi* and take part in the various *matsuri* festivals. They range from students, to mothers, laborers, doctors, representing all walks of life. I only wish that the professionals in our country would have a similar motivation.

The contrasts I see are not contradictions, contrary to what has happened in other societies where modernity and traditions have clashed resulting in a unhealthy suppression of the latter. The contrast in Japan is not only interesting but unique because it is not associated with serious friction between the old and the new. Japan was able to combine the ideas of scientific and technological progress with the traditional values and found a way to adjust to both.

One major personal disappointment

for me is the quality of some of the television variety shows. I have so much admiration for the fact that Japan has become one of the world's leading powers. And yet some of these shows are a degrading insult to both genders, especially women.

I would like to conclude by going back to the earlier point about the construction of lackluster buildings. If this trend continues, then I am afraid that very little of the charm and beauty of the old Japanese architectural style, which contributed to making Japan such a unique country, will remain. I do hope that architects and planners of modern Japan will go the extra mile to preserve this aspect of Japan's beauty. I believe they can keep the spirit of Japanese architecture and aesthetics together with the modern way of life, thus reversing the trend that threatens to obliterate the traditional landscape of Japan.

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