

# What the Tokonoma Taught Me

By Margaret Price

I have a little worm inside that is niggling me. It says Margaret, tidy up your life. The worm started growing, I suppose, from the time I began studying Tea - Japanese tea ceremony - 25 years ago. But it is wriggling harder the older I get.

What has tidiness got to do with tea? If you have ever had ritually prepared tea inside a real Japanese tea hut you will have noticed how small and bare the hut is. The host, carrying various implements for the preparation of tea, materializes into that little room from a smaller room on the other side of the wall. This room is called the *mizuya*, literally "place for using water."

As a guest at a tea ceremony you would normally not have a chance to see inside the *mizuya*, because this is the preparation room, like a kitchen is to a dining room. But I wish you could see it because you would be amazed at how tidy it is.

Above the floor-level bamboo-slatted "sink" are three or four shelves. On these shelves the tea master places the utensils he or she will use that day. No more; no less. And there is a set place for everything: the tea bowl sits here, the fresh water jar sits there, the ladle hangs here, the charcoal basket sits there.

My English mother always said: "A place for everything and everything in its place." Well, the *mizuya* is where you will see this maxim in action. The tea master will not be amused if he finds something plonked down where it should not be. Utensils not in use are wrapped in cloth and couched in boxes within boxes. For the real tea master, it is never too much trouble to tidy up and carefully put away.



Tokonoma (alcove): the recessed area in a traditional Japanese room

Photo: Margaret Price

This is what I needed to learn. And I have found something to help me do it in addition to my practice of Tea: the *tokonoma*. The *tokonoma* is something everyone can adopt, as a way of bringing order into our lives.

A *tokonoma* is the recessed area in a traditional Japanese room where a piece of art is hung and a container of flowers is placed. But in a Western-style home it could be a table against the wall. The important thing about the *tokonoma*, and what sets it aside from Western-style decorating, is that the *tokonoma* is the only place in the room where art is displayed, so it receives the undivided attention of guests.

The *tokonoma* started out in monasteries. Priests, wanting somewhere to display a mandala or Buddha picture, put a low table or a board on the floor in front of the wall where the picture was hung. On this

table they set offerings of flowers and incense. Eventually a section of the wall was recessed especially for this display. Then under the influence of tea ceremony and Zen Buddhism, *tokonoma* displays became reduced to a simple Zen saying on a scroll and a container with flowers from the field, and as such they entered people's homes. The *tokonoma* became the place dedicated to art in a room. The other walls were left bare so that the host could concentrate on displaying just one work of art for a certain mood or to honor a special guest.

The monthly artworks reflected the season - cool scenes for summer, warm scenes for winter. They usually anticipated what was to come rather than what had already arrived. You can imagine that it is more refreshing to see a picture or a few words referring to a crisp breeze in the tall brown grasses of autumn at the tail-

end of a long, hot summer, rather than scenes of that summer itself.

Anyone can make a tokonoma. You just need a bare wall and a board or table in front of it. What you do need to do is unclutter the rest of the room so that this wall is the only place for art. Then you change the art for the season or occasion. If it is hot, you want it to convey coolness, if it is cold, warmth. Then go out into the garden or walk along the roadside and pick some simple flowers. Put them into a container in front of the art and you have a tokonoma.

I get great pleasure from this simple task, which I perform once a month, of choosing a new piece of art and a flower vase and flowers to match. Not only is it a practice that challenges me artistically, it has had the side effect of forcing me to tidy up my life from its very foundations, because it means setting aside a special storage place for everything and storing it in its proper place. This has also made me reevaluate the objects I have collected over the years: cull out what I have outgrown, leaving only what has value to me. And I naturally feel like protecting those few pieces that remain, though I have yet to get around to storing them in silk pouches in boxes within boxes. Maybe next year.

I have set myself a goal of making 12 tokonoma combinations to suit the season, one for each month of the year. An additional collection of funny or sentimental objects will come out on certain occasions for special guests. I haven't completed the selection yet. It might even take a lifetime.

What I like about the tokonoma is that the art does not have to compete with other stuff on the walls: a tokonoma is kinder to the eyes and more respectful to the art.

Learning how to combine is the hardest part. I might be convinced in my mind's eye that a certain combination of art and flower vase

will match, but when I put them together it does not work and I have to start again. I am humbled. So far I have learned a lot about the size of my own ego, the value of harmony, and about how simple is really best.

Arranging the flowers is challenging, because tokonoma



Photo : Margaret Price

A kakemono (hanging picture) and a kabin (container of flowers) decorate a tokonoma

flowers are what are known as "chabana" in Japan, or "Zen flowers," and Zen flowers are quite a different matter from the symmetrical art of flower arranging of the West. A single bud or a bud plus a small branch are placed in a vase so that the viewer can allow each element its proper share of attention; not be dazzled by a crush of form and color. Zen flowers have an instant and fleeting beauty that will not last more than a day and experiencing this is something satisfying in itself.

The shelves in bookstores in the West now groan under self-help tomes on Zen and how to live in the moment. Million bestseller Dale

Carnegie advocated living each day as if you are in a vacuum-sealed compartment. Arranging Zen flowers in the tokonoma teaches you about that and about the wonder that can be contained in the simplest tasks.

If I go to a traditional Japanese house, I always try to remember to approach the tokonoma first and ask the host about the meaning of the scroll. If we had tokonomas in the West, and our etiquette required us to enquire about the art, it would do more to stimulate an interest in art than a hundred art museums. Great art can be made by your five-year-old. An elegant vase can be cut by you from a piece of bamboo. Visiting museums is all very well, but making your own tokonoma is something artistic that anyone can do.

In the Japan of only 50 years ago, politicians and big businessmen practiced Tea, not golf, and developed higher sensibilities through their tokonoma. Now most people don't even have one in their Western-style homes. Instead they buy Picassos and Chagalls and put them all over the walls. In places that do have tokonomas, such as cheap inns, the alcove is more often regarded as a handy place for the TV, the safe, the phone, the mini-bar, or any number of ornaments without homes. People dump their bags there, sit there, or hang their clothes inside. Even though this recess was, for a couple of hundred years, a sort of spiritual focus of the Japanese home, many people have now forsaken it for clutter.

I would like to bring back the tokonoma for those people who might see it as a way to unclutter their lives. In the meantime I'll get down to tidying up my own. **JTI**

*Margaret Price is a freelance writer and narrator. She published her guide to Japanese inns: Classic Japanese Inns and Country Getaways (Kodansha International).*