

# Shirasu Masako: The Passing of Beauty

By Patricia Massy

Looking at an epoch is like a walk through the woods. All along the way trees and flowers and shrubs, birds and animals capture the eye. Each has a name, each a personality. Then suddenly appears a tree of such magnificent beauty that one's footsteps stop in awe. The more one's gaze takes in the details, the more one finds to admire. Shirasu Masako was like such a tree.

Her life spanned the years from 1910 to 1998, in effect the twentieth century, but while she grew up in the modern era of Japan, her roots reached into the deep firmament of the country's cultural past. As when an ancient redwood is cut down and there is no other to replace it in the new-growth forest, or when a beautifully proportioned Japanese house is demolished and replaced by a score of motley 2X4 cracker boxes, her death represents the end not only of an era, but of a heritage.

Her prolific writing covered as diverse subjects as *Noh* drama (*Noh Mask*, Yomiuri Prize 1964), temple pilgrimages, rural culture (*Hidden Villages*, Yomiuri Prize 1972), the pottery of Living National Treasure Arakawa Tokuzo, the poetry of the 12th century poet Saigyō, antiques, handwork, and her own flower arrangements. In 1991 she was given the Tokyo Culture Award for her work in describing and supporting Japanese culture.

I myself discovered Shirasu Masako while perusing the pages of *Ginka*, a quarterly devoted to the visual arts, in which she was featured in the old thatched farm house where she had lived since 1943. Everything she had was beautiful in an understated way yet at the same time it was bold and striking. I remember there being a dark indigo striped cotton cloth covering the *kotatsu* table, and on the old wooden

*kotatsu* table top sat a set of blue and white Imari cups, striped. Beside the *kotatsu* was a striped *hibachi*. Amazingly all the stripes worked to form a harmonious scene. Here was a person with what the Japanese call a "seeing eye," an eye that instinctively discerns good design. For someone

setting it in a form so simple and neat that the impression is overpowering. *Haiku* is like that. So are the paintings and designs of the 17th century artist Ogata Korin and the pottery of the 20th century tableware designer Rosanjin.

Although she came from a wealthy, aristocratic family of Tokyo and, except for the war and occupation years, never was restrained by a lack of funds, the luxurious and the "pretty" held no attraction for her. Like the founder of the Japanese folk craft movement Yanagi Soetsu, she admired the solid strength and robust design that was born of rural life. And like Yanagi, she could go into an antique store and choose the one perfect bowl that expressed the philosophy that beauty is not made but is inherent.

One of her most precious possessions is a large Korean jar, 30 centimeters in height of the Yi Dynasty. From its wide foot and equally proportioned mouth it balloons out like a full melon. On its off-white surface are vague circular, rust-colored spots that give the misty impression of leaves or flowers or a landscape. Her search for this jar began upon a visit to the chief priest of Todaiji in Nara who had a penchant for collecting jars. From his dwelling to the garden his property was "forested" with jars. One stood out among all the others. It was a Yi Dynasty piece and exceptionally large. Enraptured with its strong shape, she began to buy Yi jars, but, unsatisfied, one after another she resold or gave away each immediately. Then this one was found in Kyoto. "Although I don't mean to compare it to the jar at Todaiji," she wrote, "neither does it have the same soft shape nor the natural feel, but even if I could have that Todaiji jar, it wouldn't fit my thatched house. To each of us is given



Photo: Hana, Kanna Shobo / Iijima Toru

*The sunken hearth heated with charcoal and filled with rice straw ash was a treasured focal point in the former farmhouse that was home to Shirasu Masako and her family. An antique Korean chest and an unusual tie-dyed mosen (wool carpet) are characteristic of her keen eye for design.*

like me whose greatest joy springs from the beauty seen in this world, finding such a connoisseur must be similar to what a person who lives for music feels when coming across a great conductor.

Her sense of design and color drew from that particular Japanese way of catching the essence of an object, eliminating all unnecessary elements, and

a lot in life, and it wasn't mine to own the Todaiji jar. This new jar deserves to be loved for its own sake. I have called it "Kazahana," Flowers in the Wind. With its faint resemblance to the jar of Todaiji, it has realized the dream I've had for 50 years, and I gaze upon it with gratitude."

What was it that led her to discard the other jars? For her the jar was not just to be enjoyed as an antique. She would caress it, absorb its energy, fill it with branches of cherry blossoms or miniature maple leaves, then wait for it to speak. *Kazahana* was the only one that passed the test.

As with the jars, flowers were not merely a way to bring a bit of color into a room. She saw into their souls. She knew how to choose just the right vase and then find the perfect setting. In an example from her book *Hana*, she took a blossoming iris and two in bud and placed them with their tall, stiff blades in a large wooden bowl originally used to stir raw lacquer until it thickens and turns brown-black. The iris seem to grow out of the rocks placed at their base and the water that fills the bottom third of the bowl. It is a picture of dark and light, straight lines and curved, slender leaves and fragile petals against thick wood, the ephemeral and the ancient. The rocks were some that she had picked up along the Kumano River on the Kii Peninsula south of Nagoya during one of her journeys to "hidden villages."

None of her arrangements are involved, elaborate, or artificial. They have impact because they are simple, direct, and capture the spirit of the flower. Her admiration of *Noh* sprang from the same qualities. "The beauty of *Noh* lies in its ability to create expression through the use of a single simple form," she wrote when describing the moment when the blind boy in *Yoroboshi* is able to "see" the islands of the Inland Sea. When the actor raises his hand and hits his chest with joy, "the thrill of his enlightenment shoots through the audience with this one gesture."

At another time she speaks about the

Photo: Kazumi Kurigami © Camel / MIYAKE DESIGN STUDIO



Shirasu Masako wearing an outfit by the internationally famous designer Miyake Issey

exceeding beauty of the actor in *Yugen* as he lifts his fan and gazes far to the south. "It struck me that this old man (the actor) wasn't thinking of a thing. He just was creating a pose: a beautiful woman raising her fan... Modern people hate form for the sake of form. So long as there is content, why should outer appearances matter at all? They consider that freedom, but really it's the opposite... If you have mastered form, content will manifest itself, perhaps even greater than you had imagined. Because the actor had no thoughts, he was unconsciously able to express unworldly beauty. To create this state of empty mind it took *Noh* 600 years of experimenting. The cleverness of one individual is shallow in comparison."

Through her essays, her Ginza store specializing in handwoven and hand-dyed Japanese fabrics, and her personal contacts Shirasu Masako exerted a tremendous influence on people in all walks of life but particularly on those involved in design. Two among the most famous are the fashion designer Miyake Issey and the flower arranger Kawase Toshiro. While still a student Miyake would drop by her Ginza salon and learn from her the qualities that distinguish good fabrics. In later years he astounded the world with his use of

fabrics and innovative cutting based on traditional Japanese concepts. "With your clothes I have no idea where to insert my head and hands," she once remarked to him, delighted with his creativity. Miyake thinks that she loved his designs because he tried to express the joy latent in a piece of cloth in the same way that she would discover the spirit of life emanating from a single flower. "Wrap the cloth!" she told him. "Be a wrappy guy!"

For Kawase Toshiro, his relationship with Shirasu Masako was more like the training a *Zen* acolyte endures. She taught him that in *ikebana* "there is no professional, no amateur, no technique." Having heard that he had made the process of creating an *ikebana* arrangement into a show, she wrote a searing letter admonishing him. "Trying to amaze people is not what you should do with flowers. Wake up!" The letter ended with "Enough of words. Show me in form." Shaken, he began walking, day and night through forests and over fields. For years he continued his search until he realized that all he had learned to order to become a professional was a minus in his quest for truly creative expression. "She asked me to find a new type of arrangement," he recalls in the December 1999 issue of the art magazine *Geijutsu Shincho*, which was entirely devoted to her. "Although I feel her pressure in every arrangement I make, I have yet to live up to her vision."

"Tradition is not something we keep alive, but what is alive," she once wrote. Perhaps so long as she remains in the heart of people like Kawase who knew her and the multitude of others like my friends who were effected by her writings, the beauty of Japan that she so thoroughly epitomized will not pass away but will pass on. I fervently hope so. ■■■

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